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THE RIGHT SORT



THE RIGHT SORT;

OR,

A ROMANCE OF THE SHIRES.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY

MRS. EDWARD KENNARD.

"Hunters are fretting, and hacks in a lather,
Sportsmen arriving from left, and from right;
Bridle-roads bringing them, see how they gather,
Dotting the meadows in scarlet and white."

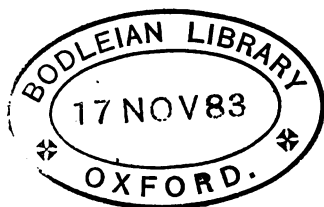
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THE RIGHT SORT.

CHAPTER I.

“LISTEN to this, Mary. It’s the very thing!” exclaimed a young lady, who, while sipping a matutinal cup of tea at the breakfast table, was engaged in carefully poring over the advertisement sheet of the *Field* with an air of the most profound absorption.

The speaker, without any absolute claim to regular beauty, was a decidedly good-looking girl, possessing as she did a general air of freshness, healthfulness, and rosiness which, taken in conjunction with youth, have an unfailing power to please. The head, small and well-shaped, was covered by a thick covering of glossy brown hair; the broad, thoughtful brow gave evidence to a considerable amount of natural intelligence, the eyebrows were dark in shade, and delicately arched, while the eyes, which sparkled and

flashed beneath them with every varying emotion, constituted the principal charm of an interesting and mobile countenance. They were dark grey, looking at times almost black, when their pupils dilated, large, bright, and liquid, fringed by the softest and longest of lashes. They looked you straight in the face, with so candid and innocent an expression, with such resolute, fearless honesty as seemed to mirror the soul within, and sufficed to prepossess the ordinary observer, and instil a belief in the integrity and sincerity of their owner. A *retroussé* nose and full mouth, adorned by a set of strong and beautifully white teeth, completed a *tout ensemble* which, though devoid the higher attributes of feminine loveliness, was in its brightness and many-changing features most eminently attractive to all those preferring variety of expression to the mere charm of form. Kate Brewer's strongest point, however, was her figure, for although her waist could not be said to aspire to those diminutive and wasp-like dimensions nowadays pronounced orthodox by the absurd decree of that tyrant Fashion, it was both round and shapely, while

the long slender throat, on which the small head sat so firmly yet gracefully, the straight carriage and well-proportioned limbs, might have satisfied even a sculptor's critical eye, so faultless were their symmetry and general outlines. Added to this, Kate Brewser's clothes, though seemingly simple, were always exceedingly natty, and put on with that scrupulous love of tidiness which with some people appears innate, and which goes far towards giving an air of *chic* not necessarily the adjunct of a large expenditure or frivolous outlay of money.

"What's the very thing, Kate?" asked her companion—a mild, gentle, fair-haired, low-voiced girl of about five-and-twenty—roused to display symptoms of lively curiosity by the other's ejaculation. "Have you at length found this celebrated hunting-box we have heard so much about lately, or is your imagination soaring to yet higher flights, and contemplates a deer forest in the wilds of Scotland for the ensuing autumn, in the midst of which you intend stalking around like a feminine Robinson Crusoe?"

"No, no," replied Kate with a light laugh.

"I'm scarcely advanced enough yet in my sporting proclivities to be able to shoulder a rifle. Somehow the slaughter of the stag possesses no attraction for me, but, as regards the hunting-box—if all advertisements were not such abominable cheats and delusions, if they did not convert every tumble-down cottage into a commodious mansion replete with modern conveniences, every wretched little two-acred field into an undulating and well-timbered park, every dilapidated outhouse into a substantial stone building, and every miserable evergreen into a thriving shrubbery; in short, if it were possible to believe in *anything* or *anybody* in this wicked world of ours, I should be greatly tempted to declare that I *had* found what I wanted; but alas! though young in years, it is my misfortune to be old in experience, and experience has taught caution, distrust, and suspicion."

And the girl shrugged her shapely shoulders with a gesture of unbelief so hopelessly cynical as to be verging on the ludicrous.

"Come, come, Kate!" returned Mary Whitbread remonstratingly, "while you

have been amusing yourself by a sweeping condemnation of advertisements in general, please to remember that I remain in a state of Egyptian darkness as to this one in particular. Won't you take pity on my ignorance, and deign to enlighten it? At present I feel thoroughly mystified."

"Do you? Then I will proceed at once to do away with the mystery, if mystery there be. But promise to listen, Mary, with all your might and main, for though in the habit of arguing against your advice, I nevertheless entertain a considerable respect for it, and although, as before remarked, the advertisement in question *sounds* the very thing, I am much too sceptical to be really sanguine."

Whereupon Miss Brewer, once more taking up the newspaper from the table, proceeded, in a clear and distinct voice to read as follows:—

"To be let, for the winter months, or by the year, as agreed upon, a most perfect, commodious, and well-arranged hunting-box, late in the possession of Reginald Rich, Esq., known by the name of Sport Lodge, and within three-quarters of a mile of the market



brandies and sodas in the air, a fine aroma of stale tobacco in every habitable room; in short, spirits and pipes impregnating with their nauseous fumes the entire atmosphere? Oh! I can imagine it all so well! A small square drawing-room, with hermetically-sealed windows, a dirty dingy carpet, fusty red or green rep curtains, an armchair or two, covered in a hideous chintz, with the inevitable wool antimacassars of every colour under the sun. Come, Kate, you must confess my sketch of a bachelor apartment is not far out on the whole."

"I confess no such thing. You are talking rubbish, pure unmitigated rubbish, Mary; and what's more, you are perfectly cognisant of the fact. Thank goodness, however, my imagination is neither so lively, or my olfactory organs so sensitive, as your own. We have only to show ourselves proof against the insidious attractions of a B. and S. or calumet of peace, in order to render poor Sport Lodge absolutely harmless. It argues a great want of self-respect to imagine that the mere title of a house can in any way reflect upon the character of its temporary

inmates. But just to show how tastes differ, I, for my part, consider there is something quaint and original about Sport Lodge—something a trifle removed from the everlasting common-places of everyday life. I am sick to death of Mount Pleasants, Hermitages, Bellevues, etcetera, etcetera. There is a sameness and monotony about such appellations, wearisome in the extreme, more especially when in nine cases out of ten the misnomer is palpable to the most indulgent eyes. If only for the sake of variety, I welcome Sport Lodge as a positive relief, and Mr. Reginald Rich, instead of being abused, deserves a fair meed of praise, as a daring and original innovator. And both courage and originality, in this prosaic age, are qualities entitled to the highest respect."

"Why, Kate," interposed Mary, smiling in spite of her inward convictions, at the dexterity of the other's argument, "what a funny girl you are, to be sure! You talk like a regular old grandmother; nevertheless I am far from being convinced, and stick to my assertion that Sport Lodge sounds de-

cidedly fast, and the chances are that if we go to live there the greater portion of the community will pronounce a similar verdict upon you and I."

"And what if they do? Do you suppose I care what people say?" retorted Kate contemptuously. "Let them make what ill-natured remarks they like."

Which was all very well in theory, Kate Brewster having not yet arrived at an age to recognise what a tyrannical mentor the world is—what a harsh, uncharitable, fault-finding, scandal-loving task-master; but which words, taken literally, would probably have caused the young lady a considerable amount of vexation.

"People situated as I am can't expect to escape tittle-tattle in some form or other," she continued loftily. "It is one of the penalties of wealth to be talked about. I am quite accustomed to such a state of things, and as for you, Mary, my dear, no one in their senses could ever accuse you of being anything but the nicest, most proper, and best behaved young woman in Christendom. If you have a fault, it is that you are

well-nigh faultless. Why you could not be fast if you *tried* ever so hard; it is not *in* you. It would be like a gentle singing bird apeing a pert cock sparrow. For myself I make no delusions. I know perfectly well that every woman who hunts is condemned beforehand. She is dubbed masculine and unfeminine, while nearly every man that she comes across congratulates himself in his heart of hearts that *his* wife, *his* sister, *his* chaste female belongings, do not join in the pursuit, but are content to sit at home stitching their eyes out over a piece of trumpery fancy needlework, tinkling the last new waltz upon the piano, or enfeebling their mental faculties by the perusal of worthless and highly sensational novels. Do not the vast majority of men and women fail to see that, because a girl is high-spirited and independent, she need not necessarily be lacking all feminine attributes, and because she can put a horse fairly well at a fence, is fond of sport, and all honest, healthy, outdoor pastimes, it does not by any means follow that she has unsexed herself, and laid all womanhood aside. If I speak warmly, it is

because I *feel* warmly on this subject. Now, according to my notions, the pursuit of the fox calls forth, firstly, courage; secondly, cool judgment; thirdly, presence of mind, and that sort of independence which teaches a person to rely upon him or herself alone. Will anyone deny the excellence of such qualities? A woman who hunts, and who hunts well, is not one to scream and faint away like a log directly any accident occurs—not one to talk, but to act—to hinder, but to help—to lose her head at trifles, but one who, in every emergency, has all her wits about her, and who, if needs be, is calculated to steer her own course with tolerable coolness and dexterity through the varied shoals of life.”

“You ought to publish a little work, Kate, since your enthusiasm is so unbounded, and entitle it, ‘A Defence of Hunting, by a Diane Chasseresse,’” returned Mary Whitbread with an amused expression of countenance.

“Nonsense, Mary. There is not the slightest occasion for me to do any such thing. But what I do maintain is, that in a general way hunting women are far more

reliable and quick-witted than the weak specimens of humanity, full of dress, vanity, and self-conceit, men make their wives, oblivious of the fact that these, and such as these, will be the mother of their future children."

"Moral. No man, therefore, ought to marry, unless the lady of his choice be qualified to scamper over fences at the risk of life and limb. According to your theory, Kate, I'm afraid my chances of matrimony are well-nigh *nil*. A fireside and a cat, apparently, are the sum total of my future prospects."

"And a man," interrupted Kate playfully. "You are one of those sweet, yielding, gentle individuals who could never encounter the world without masculine assistance and support. But to return to the subject under discussion. If we *really* go to Sport Lodge, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll stick a large placard on my back, and print on it in enormous letters, 'Beware. I'm a most improper young person; I *hunt*.' *That* ought to satisfy everyone's scruples, since those who disapprove such an obnoxious female, having received timely warning, can keep aloof, and at

all events my iniquity will appear on the surface."

"Kate, Kate, you are incorrigible!" laughed Mary Whitbread. "Argument becomes impossible when opposed to such levity. But seriously, don't you think you are going ahead just a little bit *too* fast? Does not the popular warning, not to count your chickens before they are hatched, occur to that active mind of yours? You seem to have decided straight away. Sport Lodge is to be our future destination. Under these circumstances, it is useless my entering any further protest. Nevertheless, I fear you may meet with disappointment. Remember the wonderful expectations you had formed of that place we went to see only last week—Belair Hall. You were full of enthusiasm as usual. Advertisements, of course, were mere impositions, traps for the unwary public, but nothing could possibly read better, and this might be an exception to the rule. Consequently we went on a visit of inspection. And what were the results? Failure and disgust. Why, the stables alone—filled with innumerable cobwebs, smelling like a cellar that

had never seen light of day, and damp and worm-eaten as a rotten old barge—were in themselves sufficient to inspire the profoundest melancholy, apart from the desolate, dilapidated dwelling dignified by the name of Hall. Fancy the beautiful King Olaf, or even the sturdy Duckling or fastidious Grisette, being consigned to such an abode! How they would turn up their dainty noses in scornful remonstrance! Can't you see their unutterable disapproval in your mind's eye?"

"Mary, my dear," returned Kate with mock solemnity, "whatever you do, avoid exaggeration in narrative. It is a habit, which increases like rabbits in a warren, or herrings in the briny deep. Therefore it is incumbent upon me to check the slightest tendency in you. Granted that Belair Hall was as bad as you make out, a few pots of paint, discriminate application of whitewash, and judicious expenditure, would soon have removed the evils alluded to so eloquently. The place could easily have been rendered habitable, had it suited in other respects. It did not, so there was an end of the matter. You may think me an idiot or not, as you like,

but somehow or other I have a curious presentiment, too strong to be accounted for, that Sport Lodge will see us for the winter. You know, Mary, what a fancy I've always had for going to that part of the world and seeing some tip-top hunting. An overwhelming desire possesses me to behold a *bonâ fide* Huntingshire oxer, and genuine black-thorn bull-finch. You don't hunt, or care for the sport, and wonder often at what you term my enthusiasm; but I tell you, you miss *one* of the greatest, if not *the greatest* pleasure in life by not doing so. It is a simply glorious sensation to be mounted on the back of a thorough good horse, between whom and yourself a cordial sympathy exists, and trusting each in each, go bounding over every intervening obstacle. At every fence left behind, every easy sweeping stride, the spirit rises; the blood warms in one's veins, a delicious glow of pleasurable excitement, intensified by the element of danger, pervades the whole frame, one sets one's teeth, crams one's hat on one's head, forgets every care in the world, and intoxicated with the brief transport of present joy, rides like"—

pausing breathless, in search of a suitable metaphor, "like old Harry. There is nothing in the world to compare with it."

"It strikes me *your* hobby horse runs away with its mistress altogether," observed Mary Whitbread, with a species of semi-indulgent sarcasm.

"Ah! you should hear Captain Fitzgerald on the subject of hunting," continued Kate, now thoroughly roused. "You know he has hunted everywhere, Cheshire, Gloucestershire, Ireland, the Vale, Bicester, &c., &c., and he says that for a real good all-round sporting country, with wild, straight-running foxes, none of your poor imported things, with the finest grass, and fairest flying fences in England, for a steady workmanlike pack of hounds, who can both hunt their fox in the good old style, sticking to him with patience and perseverance, and yet go the pace when required, whose noses, speed, dash, and stoutness are undeniable, and for a huntsman, who never turns his head from mortal thing, who has the eye of a hawk, the seat of a Centaur, and the heart of a lion, give him the Critchley!" And Kate, as she finished speaking,

looked up with the light of a thorough enthusiast shining in her great grey eyes, and her whole face sparkling with that animation and joyous belief in the good things contained in the future, which is one of the most precious attributes of youth, and it must be added inexperience. She could depict to herself the delights of safely negotiating the most formidable obstacles, but the reverse side of the picture, the tumbles, the vexations, the accidents, and the broken bones, never even so much as found the smallest dwelling place in her imagination.

“Oh! So that is Captain Fitzgerald’s experience is it?” returned Mary. “Poor little man! He does not deserve an unusual amount of sympathy, and I, for one, always consider him a horsey and self-satisfied individual at best; nevertheless, he doubtless took his dismissal to heart, and retired, quite as much discomfited as do the majority of Miss Brewser’s admirers.”

At this speech of Mary’s, Miss Brewser reddened perceptibly. She had indeed, a short time ago, refused the gallant Captain, but was not aware that her friend had dis-

covered the fact. Now, however, it appeared useless to attempt denial.

"Miss Brewser's admirers have a bad time of it," she observed demurely.

"That state of things may not endure for ever," said Mary.

"Yes it will. The fact is, I don't seem to care about men. They bore me, after a certain point is reached. They are all very well to talk to, and sharpen one's wits against, but my predilections end there. There are exceptions of course to every rule, but the majority of the young men I come across, are a weak, selfish and luxurious lot, living only to gratify their own tastes and their own inclinations, pleasure, not duty or honest wholesome work is the goal of their aspirations, the aim and object of lives which are frivolous and commonplace. When they contemplate matrimony, they do not consider or seek the welfare of the girl, but their own. 'How much money has she? How much can she contribute to our ease, how little detract from our requirements?' These appear to me the principal ideas penetrating their brain. Now I happen

to be particularly happy and comfortable as I am, and therefore require great inducements to effect any change in my position. Seriously, Mary, it seems to me there is little or none of the old heroic spirit left now-a-days—the spirit that breathed in such men as Raleigh, Sir Richard Grenfell, Cook, Columbus. The intrepidity, the restless craving for distinction, which in those times impelled men to action, the chivalry, the stern sense of honour, accompanied by that bull-dog pluck and capacity for fighting which made England's name what it was, seem slowly fading away, absorbed by the luxury and effeminacy of an ever-increasing civilization. The free nomadic spirit that taught us to be self-reliant and self-dependent is dying out, giving place to a fatal ease and slothfulness. Instead of being able to shift for themselves, ladies and gentlemen in these days require constant waiting upon and attendance. They cannot do without their valets and their ladies' maids. Mentally and physically they are little better than big, grown-up babies. The thing is wrong, *must* be wrong, and I believe in the Spartan system

of education. Frugality and simplicity, hardiness and courage are sadly required to ennoble the national character."

"True wisdom, to my mind, consists in making the best of things as they are," remarked Mary, to whom Kate's strivings after an ideal perfection, appeared chimerical to a degree. "You and I can't alter the world by grumbling at it, and I dare say people are not more degenerate now than formerly. As for Captain Fitzgerald, he is no worse than his neighbours, and I must say you are altogether too hard on the sex unto which he belongs."

"Am I? I think not. And why pray should Captain Fitzgerald be considered an object worthy my pity? He is far too fond of, and too absorbed in number one ever to care for anybody else, as much as he does for that all-important personage, and according to my old-fashioned or perhaps romantic notions, when a man marries, I think his wife ought to occupy the foremost place in his thoughts. Captain Fitzgerald simply looked upon me as a harmless, inoffensive sort of girl, who, possessing a satisfactory number of thousands

a year, justified him in disposing of his dapper divinely tailored person, soft drooping moustache, curly eyelashes, and killing blue eyes in the matrimonial market, thinking by so doing to gain some material advantage. No doubt, had I been a properly-minded young person, I should have perceived and been duly grateful for the vast honour thus conferred. As it was, however, my perverse disposition made me look upon the whole affair in the light of an ordinary bargain, into which neither affection, mutual respect nor esteem were allowed to enter, being regarded by one party at least as superfluous and out of place. Well, the bargain did not suit me, and nothing more remained to be said. No doubt the taste displayed on my part was lamentably bad. Nevertheless, the fact remained. Had I been a Hottentot Venus, with a sufficient number of bags of money hanging round my waist, Captain Fitzgerald would have proposed just the same. I, as an individual, had nothing to do with the offer, lucre alone being the attraction. You may say I ought not to think such things, but for the life of me how can I help doing so, when they are

patent, and self-evident? I can't go through the world with my eyes shut, and in keeping them open they are apt to see too clearly. I do not wish to be hard-hearted, but all the same I refuse to acknowledge that the Fitzgerald division is entitled to the smallest consideration. A man who seeks a woman for the sake of her fortune, and strives to shelter himself at her expense, is lucky if he escapes without incurring her deep contempt."

And Kate, recalling the discomfited guardsmen's amazement and incredulity, and the utter bewilderment with which he had received his *congé*, laughed a bitter little laugh, which sounded strangely from the fresh young lips.

"Now, Kate, it is my turn to be angry," said Mary Whitbread, who had listened to the above peroration with manifestations of marked disapproval, rendered still more conspicuous when the lords of creation were under sweeping condemnation. "After all there is good in everybody, and often we only are to blame for not discovering the merits of others. I am quite sure if we were as keen to do so as we are to pick

holes, the world would be a much pleasanter place than it is. Now, you individually have worked yourself up into the absurd belief that, because you happen to be an heiress, possessed of a handsome fortune and good yearly income, nobody will ever care for your own self. Just as if you were some horrid old frump, instead of a—well never mind what; it won't do to make you too conceited. Anyhow, such a notion is preposterous, and if you go on encouraging ideas so foolish, your money, instead of proving a blessing, will end by being nothing but a curse. Your belief in human nature will grow weaker and weaker, disinterested affection appear an impossibility, until finally the crown will be set on this happy state of things by your driving from your side some straightforward and honest fellow who loves you dearly, and which sentiment in your heart of hearts you reciprocate. Oh! Kate, take warning in time, and before it is too late."

Mary Whitbread spoke with such unusual earnestness that in spite of herself Kate felt moved.

"When that extraordinary occurrence

comes about," she answered, with a half incredulous sigh, "either somebody falling genuinely in love with me, or I falling genuinely in love with somebody, I'll give you due notice of the fact, Mary. In the meantime, all I can say is, such a contingency appears highly remote, and I am perfectly content to remain in my present state of spinsterhood. As you know, I like my own way, and what's more, am used to having it, and I often think it would require an immense amount of devotion to render me amenable to the dictates of a husband. No, no; depend upon it I am better as I am. But, Mary, since you plead so speciously in favour of matrimony, and give such sage advice, I am more than half inclined to believe you yourself are harbouring some romantic absurdity. Come, make a clean breast of it, and confess on the spot."

"I have nothing to confess," said Mary, with evident truth, though the tell-tale blood rushed to her fair cheeks; for Kate's remark recalled the one solitary romance of her pure but uneventful life, when, in olden days, a certain long-legged, lank-haired, narrow-

shouldered, telescope-necked curate had lain himself—not his fortune, for he had none, but just himself, at her feet, and sworn undying, unalterable affection. The episcopalian demonstration had been nipped in the bud, nipped before the poor fragile blossom had had time to expand in the sunlight of answering love. Mary's father, since dead, was a practical man, who promptly discarded the idea of bliss in a cottage on twopence a year as a lunatic hallucination bordering on downright madness. The unfortunate wooer, though ardent,—in the face of opposition, became timorous and blighted, and after a melancholy interview, during which tears were freely shed on either side, took a long and last farewell of his inamorata. But the gentle Mary, having once tasted the sweetness and known the importance of being considered a Dulcinea in a pair of masculine eyes, continued to cherish sentimental recollections of the past, which, united to a species of vague indulgence towards the opposite sex, rendered her consciously, though modestly, hopeful of a future time when some other candidate might step forward and ask her to become

the sharer of his joys and partner of his life.

“Why, Mary, you are blushing! positively blushing!” exclaimed Kate in mischievous glee. “You dreadful little hypocrite. I am more confirmed than ever in my opinion that you have a sneaking sort of hankering after a dual existence. Fie, for shame! What sentimental follies are you cherishing in that foolish head? Orange blossoms, satin frocks, trousseaux, wedding favours, bride cake, and all the rest of it, I’ll be bound. You need not attempt denial; I can read you like a book. But seriously, Mary—” and the girl changed her tone—“when the happy time of which we speak really arrives, remember I am to be allowed to provide all the necessary paraphernalia—the frocks, lingerie, &c., &c.”

So saying Kate, in an unusually tender mood, put her arm round Mary Whitbread’s neck, and kissed the sweet pale face held up to her own.

The conversation somehow seemed to have affected them both, for there was a tear glistening in Mary’s eye as she said—

"Oh, Kate! how can I ever thank you for all your kindness?"

"By holding your tongue this minute, unless you wish to put me into a horrible rage. And you know how terrible I can be when thoroughly roused. But now, instead of talking any more nonsense, let us return to the subject of Sport Lodge, from which we have indeed wandered far. If you will consent to waive your objection to its unfortunate name, I had better sit down at once and write to Messrs. Brown, Fulton, and Son."

"I do not think my objection—as you call it—was really formidable, Kate. It was made more in fun than in earnest."

"Bravo. You funny little person! You quite took me in by the gravity with which you protested. However, all's well that ends well. You have had your say and I have had mine; therefore we both feel considerably relieved. Some of my ideas are rather crude I daresay, and it is a good thing for me your putting a check upon them occasionally. As it is, we argue and wrangle until between us we manage to strike upon a vein of toler-

ably good common-sense. So now for the famous letter."

Whereupon Kate Brewer sat down to write to Messrs. Brown, Fulton, and Son at Foxington after the fashion of her sex, demanding every possible and impossible particular concerning Sport Lodge, and specifying a certain day, in the event of a favourable reply, on which it would please her Majesty to run down and inspect the premises in person, prior to taking the residence on lease, for on that point her mind was quite made up. She intended to devote the forthcoming winter to the pursuit of the fox, and entertaining such an intention, what place could possibly be more convenient, handy, and suitable than the famous Foxington, celebrated from time immemorial in all annals of the chase?

CHAPTER II.

KATE BREWSEER, as already intimated, was an heiress—a good solid *bonâ fide* heiress. None of your unfortunate land-endowed proprietors, whose tenants, in these days of radicalism, assassination, and agricultural collapse, give notice, politely or impolitely, as the case may be, of their inability or distinct aversion to pay any rent, but a real unquestionable heiress, possessing an income of some six or seven thousands a year, invested principally in Consols and securities of a similar nature, whose character for stability stood as high, and was as greatly respected, as that of the Bank of England itself, and whose dividends were paid with a pleasing and unerring regularity worthy imitation. Being an only child, it may naturally be inferred that Kate Brewseer had inherited this large fortune from her parents. Such, however, was by no means the case. Colonel Brewseer, who once commanded an infantry regiment, had served with great distinction

during the Indian Mutiny, and gained for himself a character of courage and uprightness from all those with whom he came in contact. During the storming of Delhi, single-handed, he had succeeded in keeping a dozen of the enemy at bay, intent upon blowing up a large powder magazine, and for this truly gallant defence was rewarded by the bestowal of the then coveted distinction of the Victoria Cross, which in those days was more highly esteemed, and less easily obtained, than at present. Like many others of the profession, the honours that were thus received, however gratifying to Colonel Brewser's military pride, were not of a nature to replenish a purse always scanty. Glory was cheap, and cost nothing, but substantial rewards were not for the men who had shed their life's blood and ruined their health in the service of so great a country as England.

Fêtes and banquets by the score were organised in honour of the sun-dried warriors, but money wherewith to enable them to withdraw from active service and "heal them of their grievous wounds," was not

forthcoming. In Colonel Brewser's case worse results ensued, for too proud to solicit favours, too retiring of disposition to push his own interests, as did some of his more fortunate companions, when peace was proclaimed and the rebellion crushed, the War Office, by some singular fatality, overlooked his claims to promotion, and placed younger and less scrupulous men over the head of a veteran who knew what war was in deed, not only in name. The disappointment was so great that Colonel Brewser never recovered from the blow thus inflicted. As he lived, he died—a brave and fearless gentleman, rich in nothing but honour and truth, lacking oftentimes the humblest necessities, and constantly struggling to make both ends meet.

His wife, whom he had married for a pretty face and sweet temper, which latter, spite many trials, had enabled her to make their modest home a very happy one, after the birth of a son, who died in infancy, and of an only daughter—our heroine, Kate—seemed never to regain her strength, but faded slowly beneath the scorching sun of

the Indian climate like some pure and fragile lily—so slowly and so imperceptibly that not until death was imminent did the sorrow-stricken husband fully realise the situation. Then it seemed as if he could no longer live, or cared to exist, without her he had loved so well, and after a year or two he too fell a victim to the grim pursuer of mankind. Thus it came to pass that, at the early age of five, Kate Brewser was left a well-nigh penniless orphan—a solitary fatherless and motherless child.

Her only living relative happened to be an uncle on the paternal side, who long years ago had set out for Australia, possessing at that time nothing but an eager, resolute spirit, a large share of ambition, and an excellent constitution, added to a fixed determination and powerful will to succeed in whatever he undertook—one of those steadfast, lion-hearted men who, fixing their eyes on a given goal, allow no petty interests or trivial amusements to divert them from their path, but whose whole thoughts and energies are alike concentrated on the object for which they labour. Slowly but surely did

Campbell Brewser, mounting one by one the rungs of the ladder, having once taken a step in advance, never receding, but with firm foothold always struggling onwards, in process of time carve his way to fortune. Then, and not till then, when through force of sheer hard work, incessant and continuous, his health began to give way before the magnitude of this self-imposed task, though the indomitable spirit of the man was still undaunted, did he turn his face towards his native land—that glorious land of rugged hills and changing skies, of brown bracken, rushing streams, red heather, and keen mountain air; where the cock grouse cackles to his mate, the wild red deer sniffs the bracing breeze, and where such men as Campbell Brewser are born and given forth to the world—men cast in an iron mould, adventurous, shrewd, self-reliant, and self-confident in the highest sense of the word, formed alike by nature and by temperament to be the pioneers of every fresh enterprise, every hazardous undertaking, men on whose broad and capable shoulders the burden of life sits fitly, and who, with that innate love

of the beautiful land of their birth which in far-off climes clings to them like perfume to a flower, given out more strongly when the day is well-nigh o'er, return, the struggle at an end, the battle won, to lay them down and die in the oft-remembered home of their youth—the home where they had trotted about the winding burns, where they had pressed the springy heather with their little bare red feet, where they had fished and bird-nested, and where their long-since dead mother had breathed a nightly prayer over their innocent couch. Ah! the man's heart must be cold indeed within him, must be hard and callous, who can forget such early days, and who in his old age does not yearn to revisit the scenes of his childhood.

With Campbell Brewser, as the years went by, the yearning became so intense that nothing short of fulfilment could appease the longings of his weary heart. And now, in her time of need this man, whose lofty, rugged nature, seeming to stand alone, though not despising, had never yet sought solace in the love of woman, took unto himself the little houseless, homeless orphan;

he who in his far-off home in the Bush hardly knew the sound of a child's sweet shrill voice or sturdy, pattering footsteps, in the autumn of life resolved to shield and protect the lonely creature, who after all was of his own kith and kin, his niece, and daughter of the dead brother whose image he had never ceased to worship. He, too, was desolate and alone, save for a nephew, the son of a deceased sister, who he had in a measure adopted, for lack of any worthier object on which to pour out the full wealth of affection which had so long lain dormant and almost unsuspected within his breast. Therefore Campbell Brewser, immediately when his brother's death became known, determined that Kate should live with him and be his charge in the future. And as the years rolled on, the strong, resolute man, who in his youth, when love should have come naturally to him, as it does to the birds and the beasts, had been too absorbed in physical labour to render any tender passion admissible, realized for the first time that all along a void had existed in his heart which this tiny creature filled.

This large-eyed, high-spirited, resolute and fearless child, who in many ways so closely resembled himself, appealed to his better nature, teaching him softness and humility, sympathy and love, while he in his turn imparted to Kate much of that energy and force of character which had always rendered him conspicuous among his fellow-men, and which, added to an austere simplicity and innate nobility of disposition, commanded not only obedience, but affection. Thus little Kate became the very apple of his eye, the poetry and romance of his declining years. It seemed as if a new element of brightness and refinement and unmixed delight had entered into his hitherto somewhat prosaic life, tinging it with a golden light. To be with Kate was a perpetual source of wonder and of joy. It was enough for him to hear her innocent prattle, to watch the sudden illumination of her expressive countenance, and to endeavour to keep pace with the quick, strange workings of her childish mind; its pleasures, its sorrows, its questionings, its simplicity and shrewdness, were all alike novel, all alike charming and de-

lightful. Not only did she become his play-fellow and idol, but also his companion, for the child was unusually quick of comprehension, and clever beyond her years.

Kate fully reciprocated Campbell Brewer's affection, or rather idolatry. She was never so happy as when with him, and her chief delight consisted in endeavouring to induce him to narrate some of the adventures and stirring incidents of his Australian life.

That unerring instinct possessed by all children and dumb animals told her that, although outwardly rough, her uncle was good and kind, honest and true. Therefore, in her turn, she loved him with all the intensity of an ardent nature, with the reverence and the hero-worship which are so inexpressibly beautiful in the young towards the old, when the youthful imagination is apt to elevate and exalt its object, perhaps even beyond its intrinsic merit.

Nestling on his knee, or with her little hand firmly clasped in his big strong one, Kate would oftentimes coax her uncle into a description of the far-off land where so many of his years had been spent.

"Poor uncle !" she would exclaim, rubbing her soft pink cheek backwards and forwards like a kitten against his broad shoulders. "How terribly lonely you must have been in those days with nobody to take care of you !"

"I was not so well off as I am now, was I, my darling?" he replied, stroking the little dark head tenderly. "Looking back, it really seems extraordinary how I managed to exist all those years without you. When I think of what I missed I positively grudge the time ! Heigh ho !"

"But, Uncle Campbell," remonstrated Kate gravely, "you know I was not born then, so I could not have been with you, even had I wanted to. And perhaps you might not have liked any other little girl so well as you do me."

"That's very certain, my pet."

And then the conversation usually wandered off into different channels, Kate having been made extremely proud and happy by this distinct and positive assurance. She was an odd little being, and would have felt furiously jealous at the prospect of any

other young lady usurping her place in the affections of Campbell Brewser, having once indeed been known to attack a diminutive party with her teeth solely because she considered the offending individual had received too large a share of attention from the gentleman in question.

The other inmate of this happy household—Herbert Munro, Mr. Brewser's nephew and reputed heir—was some five years, Kate's senior. Yielding and pliant, easily led astray, full of good resolutions, but without the strength of character or moral energy requisite to put such good resolutions into force, delicate both physically and mentally, it seemed as if the boy and girl should have changed places. Kate, with her strong vitality, keen intelligence, and unquestionable ambition, ought to have been the man, while Herbert, as a woman, would have made one of those dependent and trustful creatures who appeal insensibly to the masculine nature, and who are often preferred to their sturdier sisters.

In spite of such differences both of character and constitution, the cousins were

excellent friends, and on the most intimate terms; but although Herbert possessed a considerable advantage in point of years, even in these early days he failed to assert his superiority. In all their pastimes and pursuits Kate invariably proved the leading spirit—hers the master mind; for she it was who directed, patronised, and advised, while Herbert followed suit with unquestioning obedience. He lacked that boyish confidence and roguish assumption of self-assertion, the very impudence of which possesses an undoubted charm for the feminine mind, ever prone to worship strength, and which so quickly establishes an ascendancy over it.

Kate, at this time, was far too young to analyse such feelings. She only knew that when with Herbert she somehow always felt herself to be the most capable of the two, stronger both bodily and intellectually, while in her uncle's presence the exact reverse was the case. When at his side she was nothing but a weak little child, humble, ignorant, loving, eager in quest of knowledge, and realizing with thankfulness the advantages derived from the protection extended to herself.

She could never forget that had it not been for her uncle, and her uncle's care and affection, she might have been left utterly alone in the world. She had no fears, no doubts, no hesitations or distrust, when Campbell Brewser was there. She believed in him as she believed in her God. In her eyes he was the best, the kindest, the cleverest, the nicest, and the most superior of human beings. Compared to him Herbert appeared a weakling and a nonentity; besides which poor Herbert's nature happened to be somewhat timorous, while neither Kate nor Campbell Brewser appeared to know the meaning of the word fear. There seemed to them something wrong, unnatural, uncanny, in the boy's want of courage, in his instinctive shrinking from everything the least unpleasant or dangerous. They were fond of him certainly, but unconsciously almost, in the love of each, was mingled a large sprinkling of contemptuous pity. He seemed formed and fashioned of such different stuff to themselves, more like some beautiful fragile flower, fair to look upon, but so delicate as to be unable to face the slightest

storm, which bowed it to the earth at the very first gust of wind ; a thing deficient in hardiness and vitality, only fitted to be pampered in a heated hothouse ; whilst they were as the sturdy upthrusting thistle, which forces its glossy purple head over the barrenest plot of ground, lordily indifferent to rain and cold and climate, defying each alike with its sharp spiky leaves. And perhaps, though quite unintentionally, this pair of kindred spirits was apt to be a little hard at times, and to scornfully estimate the tender alien nature of the youth. Their judgments inclined towards harshness, and their estimations of Herbert's worth leant somewhat on the side of disdain, with the result that the lad grew still more silent and reserved, shy, strange, and incomprehensible. And so mid sunshine and shade the years repeated themselves. The trees in the picturesque old garden in due season put on first their green, then their red and yellow, finally their meagre black raiment, preparatory to sleeping the long winter through, as if mourning the beautiful bygone summer days. Then, when the spring once more came round, the life-

giving sap burst out into tender, curled-up leaves, which unrolled themselves gently in the sunshine. The birds carolled their love songs in loud, triumphant notes, fighting, courting, building, mating, until the young ones came forth, and in course of time, feeling strong and gladsome, stretched their wings and flew away, obedient to that great law of nature which dictates the desertion of parents when no longer useful and necessary. In the green fields, starred by golden buttercups and sweet smelling clover, the white lambs, dam-attended, frisked and gambolled in pure light-heartedness, wagging their supple tails, bleating with soft, persuasive voices, stretching their long, ungainly limbs, and courting the rays of the sun in a state of dreamy enjoyment and blissful ignorance of the future. Little recked they that all life, however strong and beautiful, ends in death, come it by the cruel butcher's knife, disease, or the slow process of natural decay. They, poor innocents ! like Herbert and Kate, were happy in the present, demanding, thinking, realizing nothing more !

Oh ! glorious youth ! that knows not

regret, remorse, or ought but transient sorrow, whose joys are keen and pains short-lived, to whom the past is a void, the future a blank, and the present—the happy, fleeting present, here to-day and gone to-morrow—all-sufficing, all-engrossing, how we envy thee in thy old age! How lovingly, and with what reverent recollections, do we not look back upon and cherish thee! In thy innocence and thy joy thou art more lovely than anything on the face of this wide earth, and yet so evanescent, so ephemeral, that ere we have learnt to fully appreciate the inestimable gifts which thou conferrest, the heedlessness, the freshness, the exquisite light-heartedness, the animal strength and spirits, which are a part and parcel of thyself, thou art gone—either gently faded by the unflagging hand of time, or else killed by some rude shock, which, rousing mankind from this short period of unthinking content, sets a mark upon his life for evermore, bringing him, once for all, face to face with the stern realities and complex problems of existence!

Even now, slowly, though all the same surely, was the shadow creeping up, destined

to plunge the peaceful household in grief and envelope it in a shroud of darkness. Death, who delays for no man—the dread reaper with his sickle—was at hand, intent on mowing down and claiming yet another of the long list of reluctant victims.

It was upon Kate's seventeenth birthday—how well hereafter she had cause to remember that day!—and Herbert, then at college, but lately returned home, was in his twenty-second year, that in the middle of the night the girl was roused from her dreamless slumbers by the entry of the old housekeeper, who, apparently scared out of her senses, shook her violently by the arm, until she awoke, with a beating heart, wondering what dreadful calamity had taken place.

“Get up, Miss Kate, dearie, get up at once,” cried the seemingly distracted woman, in a hurried and tremulous voice. “Your uncle hae been taken vera ill.”

Maggie McTavish was of the same nationality as her master, as indicated by her tongue, and had lived with him ever since his return from Australia. She had been born and bred in the village, and was devoted

heart and soul to all those appertaining to the time-honoured family of Brewser, which she worshipped as a superior race. At baking, brewing, churning, and preserving she had no match in the whole county, but having always possessed the blessing of robust health, Maggie, even in her mature age, felt overwhelmed with alarm at any symptom of illness, more especially when displayed by those on whom her affections were fixed.

“My uncle!” ejaculated Kate, in that state of uncomprehending bewilderment incidental to a sudden awakening at an unusual hour. “What of him?” Then roused to a sense of uneasiness by old Maggie’s flurried manner, she added, “Oh, Maggie! why do you look so strangely at me? Is anything the matter?”

“Joost that,” answered Maggie solemnly. “If I am no mistaken there’s vera much the matter.”

“With whom? With my uncle?” cried Kate, springing out of bed, and now thoroughly awake. “But no,” as if trying to reassure her fears, “there can’t be anything serious, for when I wished Uncle

Campbell good-night at ten o'clock he was then perfectly well, and in the best of spirits."

"A guid deal may happen between ten and one o'clock," replied Maggie. "Come, come, noo, Miss Kate, dinna lose time in talking—we may both be wanted for aught we ken—but put on your claes as fast as ye can. Here, throw this dressing gown over your shoulders, for the night air is unco keen, and it wadna do for my bonnie bairn to catch cold. There! that's right," as Kate meekly did her bidding. "And noo we wull depart."

"Oh, Maggie! suspense is the worst of all to bear. Tell me quickly what you know," said poor frightened Kate, as she clung to the kindly old woman's arm.

Thus adjured, Maggie commenced her sorrowful tale.

"Weel, then, Miss Kate," she said, "ye maun know that your uncle hae had a fit o' some sort, though I canna tell ye rightly what the name o' it wad be, never having had any experience in sic-like dreadful matters—"

“Yes, Maggie,” interrupted Kate breathlessly; “go on.”

“Weel, then, my dearie, after ye had gane upstairs to your ane room, Mr. Brewser rang the bell and asked for some hot whuskey and water. Jock happened to be oot, so I fetched the drink myself, and made it strong and guid, thinking it wad do the master no harm, since he complained o’ a bad pain in the head, and said he felt dizzy and out o’ sorts. When I brought the wee drap into the study I noticed Mr. Brewser looked unlike himself. His een were vera wild, and his face so flushed that, had I na been acquainted with his temperate habits, I might hae suspected he had already been drinking mair than was guid for him. However, I joost made up my mind to sit up all night in case he wanted a bit help. I canna tell ye what induced me to do so, but I had a kind o’ presentiment something evil was going to happen. I went and sat in the corridor ootside, and by-and-bye I heard him begin to tramp up and doon, up and doon the study, joost like some caged animal at a show; then on a sudden came the noise o’ a heavy body falling

to the airth, after which all was still again. I rushed in as fast as my puir auld legs could tak me, and wae's me"—beginning to cry bitterly—"there I found my dear, kind master lying all in a heap on the floor, and looking for all the warld like a corpse. Oh, Miss Kate! it was awful, joost awful!"

And Maggie, true to her class, determined that the narrative should gain rather than lose in solemnity in the telling, sobbed with more vehemence than ever.

"Poor uncle; poor darling uncle," exclaimed Kate repeatedly, as they hurried through the long passage which led to the dying man's bedroom, for dying he was, although neither yet comprehended the fact. Already the honest, manly countenance appeared changed and distorted by pain, and the stalwart form stricken, like some fine old oak uprooted by the vehemence of a passing storm or flash of lightning. In the space of a few short minutes Death had performed his task with certitude, stamping his imprint on the suffering features.

Meanwhile Campbell Brewser lay totally unconscious, his slow and stertorous breath-

ing alone giving sign that life had not yet altogether departed, or the brave spirit fled from its earthly tenement. But for the first time in the whole course of her recollection did Kate's passionate grief and terrified entreaties fail to rouse him. Never before had kiss of hers met with no return. The very thought filled her being with a nameless dread. Perhaps it was well for him that he could not witness the girl's deep sorrow. It would have wounded the loving heart sorely to have seen Kate's slender form shaken by a very tempest of uncontrollable sobs while she prayed aloud in her agony that he would speak to her.

"One word, Uncle Campbell, only one word, just to show that you are alive," she repeated over and over again, almost mechanically.

Alas ! the words of Campbell Brewster in the future were destined to be but few, if any, for the family doctor, who had been sent for with all haste, on his arrival pronounced Mr. Brewster to be suffering from an attack of apoplexy of a most fatal description, and that—although before the end approached he

should not be surprised if the patient rallied considerably—it was useless disguising the fact that small hopes could be entertained of his ultimate recovery. Mr. Brewser might possibly linger for some weeks, yet no encouragement could be derived from his present condition. Of course, “while there was life there was hope;” but according to ordinary practice nothing short of a miracle could restore Mr. Brewser to health. Therefore it was false kindness not to speak the truth, and prepare those attending him for the worst. So spoke the straightforward country doctor, unversed in the evasive arts of his town-dwelling brethren.

For two whole days and nights Kate never left her uncle’s side. Love did everything suggested by experience, and if love alone could have saved Campbell Brewser’s life it surely would have been spared; but the tenderest tendrils are torn asunder and severed by the ruthless reaper, and it was ordained otherwise by One who watches over poor suffering, impatient humanity, and to whose decrees, however hard they may occasionally appear, we are all bound to submit.

For to our mortal and finite comprehensions faith in the unknown and the infinite is difficult to acquire, more especially when the blood runs warm in the veins, and the world in the springtime of youth seems only beginning to unfold and open out before us. Kate's mind was full of rebellious thoughts against the workings of Providence as on the morning of the third day she sat by her uncle's bedside, weary mentally and physically, while the tears rained down unheeded on her listlessly clasped hands.

Suddenly a voice, very faint and weak, but yet recognizable as the voice of Campbell Brewer, broke the death-like stillness of the chamber. Kate started violently as she saw her uncle's eyes fixed upon her own with every appearance of returning consciousness.

"Kate," he said, "don't cry, my darling. I cannot bear to see you shed tears."

The joy and the surprise of hearing him speak, in her exhausted condition, were almost too much. She jumped from one extreme to the other, without reason or reflection. So great an improvement in the invalid must mean that the miracle unto

which the doctor had distinctly alluded had already taken place.

"Oh! Uncle Campbell, Uncle Campbell," she exclaimed, in hysterical delight. "I shall have no need to cry now that, thank God, you are better. You will make haste and get well, darling, won't you, if only for my sake? You do not *know* what I have suffered since your illness, or how miserable I have been."

She looked at him with tears of affection dimming the beautiful grey eyes, and a soft, quivering smile playing around the corners of the trembling mouth. He knew better however, than to encourage vain hopes—hopes which he realized too well would never be fulfilled in this world.

"Don't deceive yourself, my precious one," he said softly. "Something tells me that my time on earth is over, and nothing remains but to try and face my fate like a man. It is no use repining over the inevitable. God bless you, Kate, and keep you from all harm, until we meet some day in heaven. You have rendered the closing years of my life happier far than any I had known before.

Such happiness in fact *was too great*, more than I deserved, or had any right to expect. I am thankful to my Maker for His goodness, even although he has chosen to call me hence sooner than we ever contemplated. It seems hard to have to leave my little Kate, does it not? But His will be done."

There was something inexpressibly touching in this strong man's patient resignation, in his unselfishness, his tenderness and compassion for the sorrow which he so clearly perceived overwhelmed the young girl.

"Uncle Campbell, dear Uncle Campbell, you whom I love and honour more than anybody in the whole world, you will break my heart if you talk so," protested Kate vehemently. "You *shan't* die. Don't *speak* of dying. I won't *let* you. I will sit up night after night, never leave your side, and nurse you ever so carefully. You shall pull through yet. You *must* pull through. Oh!" with a bitter intonation of voice, "Oh! it cannot be. God would never show such cruelty towards His creatures. If He is really good and kind as people say, He won't take you away—you who are father and mother both

in one. Uncle Campbell, I could not live without you, and that's just the fact."

Poor child! She was so unused to such griefs as this, so fresh to sorrow in any shape, that a feeling of passionate resentment filled her heart. The mere idea of losing the dear friend of her youth seemed too terrible to be true. She struggled against it with impotent incredulity, just as a poor imprisoned bird struggles against the iron bars of his cage, and with similar results, only to fall back with fierce pain, unavailing wrath, and finally black despair.

Mr. Brewser at her words raised his hand from the coverlet in feeble reproach.

"Kate, my own darling," he said, appealing to her with tender pity, "you don't want to make a woman of your poor old uncle, do you? You must help him to bear this trial as you have helped him to bear many others ere now. Don't you remember how brave I always thought you? How proud I used to be of your courage! I recollect as clearly as if it only took place yesterday, one Monday, long years ago now, when you rode the little black Shetland pony Thekla, and

she took fright at something or other, I forget exactly what, ran away for miles, and ended by throwing you over her head violently on to the hard high road. What a fright I was in to be sure ! You were a wee bit of a lassie then, not more than six years old, and when I came up, with my heart standing still through fear, though your poor little arm was all bleeding, and badly cut from the elbow downwards, and your face as white as the ox-eyed daisies growing by the hedge-row, what did you do but stretch out your tiny hands towards me and say, ‘Don’t be frightened, dear Uncle Campbell. I am not much hurt, and please do not be cross with Thekla. It was not her fault, and I should like to get on and ride her home.’ Do you remember that, Kate ? For if *you* don’t *I* do. And I said to myself, ‘Bless her little heart ! The child is of the right sort, and no mistake. Game as a bantam cock. She takes after her father, who was a true chip of the old block, a regular Highland Brewster.’ And I was so proud of you, Kate, so foolishly fond and proud. Your fearlessness delighted me beyond measure. And now, my darling,”

looking at her with dim, but loving eyes, "you are not going to do anything to make me alter my opinion, *are* you? From that day to this I have never seen cause to change it. If for *my* sake I ask you to be brave, in order to please *me*, you will try, won't you, Kate dearest?"

He had a way about him of overcoming resistance which went straight to Kate's heart. She felt it impossible not to endeavour to accede to a request so touchingly worded.

"I would do anything in the world for your sake," she returned fervidly, "anything that you could possibly ask of me. But oh!"—with a fresh burst of grief—"this—this, Uncle Campbell, is so hard to bear."

Campbell Brewster passed his hand hastily across his brow ere he replied—

"I know it is, darling—hard for you and hard for me—very hard for both of us to have to part. We have been such good friends, have we not, Kate? Somehow or other from quite the beginning we seemed to get on and understand each other's ways. Mine, too, must have been funny, rough ways often and often to a wee bit slip of a

girl; but you never seemed to mind them, Kate, as most children would have done, or as Herbert did for instance. Why, the very first day we met, when I went to fetch you from off the steamer, instead of being shy and frightened, or wanting to hide behind your Nannie's skirts, you looked up into my face with those great truthful grey eyes of yours, slipped your little hand inside mine, and won my heart upon the spot. Heigh-ho! how the good old times come back to one to be sure!"

His mind seemed to wander off to the past, and for a few seconds silence prevailed in the chamber. Then, with an apparent effort at concentration of purpose, Campbell Brewster continued—

"But the minutes are precious, and while I am yet able I wish to speak to you about yourself. Have you ever thought what was to become of you, Kate, if *this* should happen which is now happening?"

There was no mistaking the meaning of the question. She hid her face in her hands while a shudder ran through all her frame. The power of speech seemed to have forsaken

her ; for what did she care about the future when *he* was dead and gone? Everything looked equally dark and blank and colourless.

She almost went the length indeed of feeling vexed with her uncle for bringing the subject under discussion, and wondered how he could talk so composedly when on the eve of leaving her for evermore. She herself could not keep calm when she reflected that she might never see that dear, rugged face again, or listen to the grave and loving voice. Life without him appeared impossible. All the reasoning and argument in the world could never make her think otherwise. Of that she was convinced.

“You see, my darling,” continued Mr. Brewser, after a pause, during which Kate’s reply was evidently not forthcoming, “you are very young to face existence all by yourself, and when I go Herbert will be your only living relative, the only one left who will have the right to care for and tend you. I believe him to be a right thinking lad at heart, though in many ways he has not grown up as I could have wished, and since he went to

college has occasioned me considerable anxiety. Still, I hope everything may come right in the end, and you, Kate, possess courage and determination enough for both. I make no secret of my plans, and if Herbert only accedes to them I tell you frankly he will then inherit the greater bulk of my fortune. He will possess riches sufficient to surround you with every luxury. The world, however, is apt to be ill-natured. So long as I lived, I was your fitting and natural protector, but at my death it becomes impossible for a young man and a young woman of your and Herbert's respective ages to live together without giving rise to comments of a more or less malicious nature. Don't you begin to comprehend, or is it necessary for me to speak more plainly still? Well, then," as Kate's countenance assumed a somewhat mystified expression, "I must impart the scheme which for many years past I have cherished, and which would provide against any such contingency. The scheme which if you and Herbert only consent to will render me perfectly happy, and enable me to bid good-bye to you both with a quiet mind,

knowing that *you* at least will be comfortably and, I hope, happily provided for—Kate, surely *now* you can guess what I mean ? ”

She did at last, as was evident from the downcast eyes and the hot blushes that dyed her girlish face.

“Do you mean you want me to *marry* Herbert ? ” she faltered, in a voice she hardly recognised as her own, for the proposition had come upon her with the shock of a great surprise.

“I do. You are fond of Herbert, and have been brought up together. Therefore, what can be more natural and proper ? Unless I am greatly mistaken, Herbert will make you a kind and good husband.”

“I don’t want a kind and good husband,” flashed through poor Kate’s mind, but she dared not give utterance to the thought, for fear of vexing her uncle in his present state.

“Of course,” continued he, “I should never dream of forcing your inclinations on either side. Nevertheless I confess I fail to perceive any other plan calculated so effectually to secure your mutual advantage.”

“I don’t care two straws, uncle, about any

advantage so far as I am concerned," broke in Kate tempestuously. "The thing is, will such a scheme really and truly make you happy? That is all I want to know."

"Undoubtedly. The knowledge that you and Herbert were actually engaged to each other would remove the one care harassing my mind. I cannot bear to think of your being left all alone."

"Say it again, so that there cannot possibly be any mistake," repeated Kate with a strange insistence and feverish eagerness. "If I marry Herbert it will make you really and truly happy?"

"Really and truly happy," re-echoed Mr. Brewser, wondering a little at her earnestness. "It will realise the fondest visions of my dying days."

"Then that is quite enough. I cannot of course answer for Herbert, and I trust to you, uncle, not to place me in any false position, but as regards myself I promise faithfully to fulfil your wishes."

Truly indeed had Campbell Brewser spoken when he said that this girl was brave, and a real chip of the old block. She liked Her-

bert as a sister likes a brother—nay, with even a more luke-warm affection, for his faults had not improved with age, and she was keenly alive to the weakness and want of stability inherent in his character. Her whole soul revolted against this prosaic, dispassionate *marriage de convenance*. Girl-like, she had formed her own notions of an ideal man, who should in all things closely resemble her uncle, and who like him should be capable of inspiring respect and confidence, while she on her side was to acquire a certain influence, and use that influence gently and for his good, so that she might uphold him in all great works, cheer his drooping spirits, comfort him in failure, rejoice in his success, quietly and unobtrusively identify herself with his every pursuit. Something such as this was Kate's ideal view of matrimony, for whose illusions youth and inexperience must be her best excuse; nevertheless, if poor Herbert failed hopelessly to come up to the required standard, it is not perhaps to be wondered at, seeing that men are not born perfect, and the Campbell Brewers of the world are few and far between.

Kate was too clear-headed to deceive herself. In agreeing to her uncle's request she was conscious of having made a great sacrifice, and one that in after life she might very probably repent. To be bartered away as it were, to be won without being wooed, to become a wife from a sense of convenience and mutual interest, were alike hateful to her, but to please her uncle, the one being in the whole world whom she loved heart and soul, she would cheerfully have lain down her life. Therefore, once certain that this promise would satisfy him and comfort his last moments, she never hesitated. Had he been well and in his usual health she might not have yielded so easily, might have argued the matter roundly, but now she could not vex or cross him in any way. Hers may have been mistaken courage, but surely it was courage in its highest form—a courage in its forlorn heroism closely akin to that of our soldiers when obedient to orders they hurled themselves against the iron guns of the countless enemy in the "grim valley of death."

"Thank you, Kate," said Mr. Brewster, a

smile of content actually playing around his poor blue lips and making him look more like himself again. "I knew your common-sense would help you to see things in their true light. But now send for Herbert; I cannot afford to delay, and I should like this affair settled at once."

So Herbert was sent for, and before long made his appearance, whereupon Mr. Brewser once more proceeded to unfold the nature of his much cherished scheme.

The young man appeared, if possible, even more disconcerted than Kate. He blushed up to the very roots of his hair, and displayed signs of the liveliest emotion, which were by no means lost upon Mr. Brewser, who from various causes had recently begun to view Herbert's proceedings at college with suspicion.

"Well," said he, when his desires had been made known, "what do you say, Herbert?"

Poor Herbert, at this plain question, evidently demanding an equally plain answer, looked ready to sink into the earth with confusion and distress of mind.

"It is impossible, perfectly impossible," he muttered, as if speaking to himself. "I cannot marry Kate."

"May I ask if you have any objection?" asked Mr. Brewser, with growing distrust.

"No, not exactly any objection," returned Herbert prevaricatingly. "Of course I like Kate, just as I hope Kate likes me, but—but—"

"But what, man? For God's sake speak out. What do you mean by all this shilly-shallying? If there is any reason why you cannot marry Kate tell me the honest truth. In justice to her and in justice to myself it is only right that you should do so."

"I have nothing to tell," said Herbert sullenly.

"Very well then," returned Mr. Brewser, whose wrath now appeared fairly roused, while Kate stood by ready to drop with humiliation; "I will proceed to explain the nature of my will, as it is just possible it may influence your decision."

"Oh no, uncle, please don't!" interrupted Kate in an agony. "You are exciting your-

self far too much, and neither Herbert or I care the least about your money."

"Speak for yourself, Kate," returned Mr. Brewser. "I'm not so sure of Herbert. Now listen both of you to what I am about to say. If you two marry I have left nearly the whole of my property to Herbert, with the sole condition he shall assume the family name of Brewser. Kate has already signified her willingness to enter into this contract. She agrees with me in thinking such an arrangement the most suitable one under existing circumstances."

Kate here endeavoured to speak, but Mr. Brewser continued, unheeding of the interruption—

"It now therefore only remains for you, Herbert, to follow your cousin's example. Understand once for all I have no power to force your inclinations on either side—in fact, I only seek to secure your welfare. When, however, you say 'the thing is impossible,' I not unnaturally beg that you may state your reasons. If they be legitimate ones, Herbert my boy, don't fear to name them, and I will endeavour to act justly and fairly; but "

—and he fixed a keenly suspicious glance upon the young man—“if you are deceiving me, if you are so behaving as to wrong Kate or wound her natural feelings, I swear to God I will make some other provision for her future and give you cause to repent your unmanly conduct.”

So saying Mr. Brewser fell back exhausted on the pillow, while his countenance once more assumed a fixed and rigid look.

Possibly this direct allusion to his will sufficed to convince Herbert of the imprudence of not carrying out the invalid's wishes, for with a sudden compliance strangely at variance with his previous statements he now expressed himself willing to become engaged to Kate. As for Kate, mortification and perplexity racked her whole being. Herbert's reluctance to the bargain was perfectly clear in her eyes. *She* might find this proposed marriage distasteful, but it was evidently doubly so to *him*. Maidenly dignity and pride were sorely wounded, and already she began to fear that, with the best intentions possible, her uncle was committing a grievous error. For the first time

almost in her life she questioned any action of his, and of the three human beings now occupying the apartment, he alone who was so shortly destined to quit this earth seemed thoroughly contented. Nevertheless by Mr. Brewser's desire they plighted their troth there and then, pledging themselves to become man and wife six months after the date of his decease.

The end came soon—sooner, in fact, than anyone foretold. The return to consciousness proved but the last flickering of the lamp of life. After a prolonged interview with his lawyer, during which neither Herbert nor Kate were allowed to be present, Mr. Brewser fell into a tranquil sleep, and in sleep his spirit passed away, so peacefully and so calmly that even Kate, who had re-occupied her place by the bedside directly the legal business was transacted, failed to perceive that in this quiet slumber the soul had soared from its earthly prison, leaving for ever and for aye all the aching weariness, the void and unrest of life behind.

No need to describe Kate's passionate grief, or the horror of death which now fell

upon the girl. A blight had overtaken the hushed and saddened household, whose cheerfulness and mirth could never be restored. Then the dead man's body was laid under the ground, and after the funeral his will was formally read. With the exception of one or two legacies to old and valued servants, and a sum of five hundred pounds per annum to be paid to Kate, Mr. Brewser left his entire fortune to Herbert Munro. Attached to the will, however, was a sealed codicil, with instructions that it should not be opened until the day appointed for the wedding, and it was upon this recently executed deed that Mr. Brewser had evidently been employed during his last remaining hours of existence.

Time now passed slowly and monotonously away, Kate struggling hard to adapt herself to the changed order of things. She was much alone, for Herbert rarely remained at home, pleading his collegiate duties in excuse, and moreover during his brief visits appeared absorbed by some internal care, and curiously preoccupied.

Over and over again did Kate endeavour

to invite his confidence, and as often did he repulse her advances. In fact, so visibly did he shun her society that all intercourse between the cousins became more and more constrained. It can easily be imagined, therefore, that it was with a sore and aching heart poor Kate, as the months went by, completed her humble preparations. For three whole weeks Herbert had never come near the place, and yet their wedding day was fixed for the morrow. Surely a stranger bridegroom it would be hard to find anywhere; so at least thought Kate as she stood before the glass trying on a plain white silk gown purchased for the ceremony. She had not yet recovered her uncle's death, and her heart felt heavy within her. Nothing indeed but the consciousness of acting in entire accordance with his wishes could have sustained her in the present ordeal. Suddenly the door opened and old Maggie came in, bearing a telegram that had just arrived. It was from Herbert, and contained but a very few words, yet they were enough to change the whole course of her future career.

"Forgive me, Kate," it said. "I have deceived you cruelly. There can be no marriage between us, for I was married this morning to another."

So she read, as with a great, unconscious sigh of relief the crisp pink paper fell from her white fingers down to the ground, where it lay totally unheeded. Even the exclamations of old Maggie, who with the privileges of a confidential servant promptly made herself mistress of its contents, failed to rouse the girl to a full sense of the situation. In that first moment of astonishment she was aware only of the removal of some cruel, crushing weight that had been hanging over her for months. Her liberty was restored, and once more she was free! Free to love where and whom she pleased, free to follow the dictates of her own heart, and saved by the fault of another at the eleventh hour from ties which she recognised now had all along been insupportable.

The feeling of relief was so intense that she thanked God on her knees for this providential escape. Not till many hours afterwards

did she begin to inquire into the cause of these effects, or realise the fact that she had been shamefully treated ; in the common parlance of the world—hopelessly jilted. Neither until she learnt the full particulars of Herbert's disgraceful marriage did she harbour any ill-will against her cousin. But when she heard the sort of woman he had chosen, ignorant, illiterate, and of low extraction, how when engaged to this person he had lied to his uncle on his death-bed, and professed his willingness to marry herself, solely through fear of being deprived of his inheritance—and how for many months afterwards, ashamed to acknowledge the truth, he had systematically deceived her until compelled to make known the actual state of the case—then Kate's indignation broke loose. The wrong she had suffered was as nothing compared with the meanness and the cowardice of Herbert's conduct. She could not forgive him these.

But curiously enough, when the codicill before mentioned came to be read, it really seemed as if Mr. Brewser, with his usual powers of intuition, had divined the young

man's intentions from the first; for in the event of Herbert committing a *mésalliance* such as the present, Mr. Brewser directed the five hundred a year to be paid to his nephew and the residue of his fortune was placed at Kate's disposal, with absolute control to do as she pleased with it, save in any way augmenting the income of her cousin. In this wise it came to pass that we find Kate occupying an independent position such as few young ladies attain to. But these events had turned the bright, impulsive, affectionate girl into a thinking, reasoning woman, shrewd beyond her years, and experienced in the ways of the world. Moreover they had imbued her with a disdainful distrust of the opposite sex, with a hearty scorn of everything paltry and mean, which latter, however admirable in the abstract, rendered her at times somewhat hard and cold in manner to all save a chosen few who had successfully inspired her respect and gained her confidence. In fact, to use a vulgar simile, hers was a case of "once bitten, twice shy." Having been so badly treated by a man, she found it difficult to believe henceforth in the sex.

Mary Whitbread, however, had completely won her affections. Gentle, refined, amiable, pure in thought and in deed, in short, a thorough little lady, Kate had not been slow to recognise the inherent sweetness distinguishing her character, and the two girls were close friends and allies. The first shock over, and the programme of life now thoroughly altered, Kate began to look about her in search of a congenial companion, and immediately thought of Mary Whitbread whom she had known intimately when at school. Interfering friends attempted to dissuade her, saying she must have some respectable middle-aged person as chaperone, but Kate vowed she did not intend committing any startling escapades, that old Maggie McTavish was quite a sufficient duenna, and that in the choice of a friend she had a right to please herself. Consequently she wrote to Mary setting forth the facts of the case, and offering her a home—an offer that Mary Whitbread, having recently lost both parents, and who was now forced to seek a livelihood as a daily governess, only too thankfully and gratefully accepted. So the two young

ladies set up house together, and for the last four years had contrived to live most amicably. They travelled, went about and amused themselves after the manner of happy, idle folks possessing a large capacity for enjoyment, to whom money is no particular object, and whose desires have only to be expressed in order to meet with gratification. That such an existence might not have some attendant drawbacks in the shape of increasing egotism and satiety is open to question; nevertheless both Kate and Mary had so far escaped any deterioration of character. They possessed an unusual share of sound common-sense, which not only prevented the perpetration of any egregious follies, but kept their eyes open to the dangers as well as to the pleasures of their somewhat peculiar position.

Kate, as the heiress, was of course exposed to the greater temptations of the two. Foreign counts, German barons, and Russian princes, when abroad, vowed allegiance by the score, and even at home she became the mark of many a penniless youth and scheming, match-making mother. As a rule,

she was a great favourite with men, being bright and amusing, and though equally indifferent, equally courteous to all; but it must be confessed that maturely seasoned girls viewed her with envy and malice, while the class of juvenile married women, now so fashionable in London society, abused her heartily. In short Kate's fault was, she occupied too large a share of masculine thoughts and masculine attentions to be pleasing to the other competitors for such honours. Nevertheless, her admirers were received with a coldness and a composure decidedly discomfiting to the majority. The truth was, no man as yet had come up to her ideal. Either they were weak—an unpardonable fault—vain, conceited, self-satisfied, stupid, prosy, dull, unintelligent, vapid, idiotic, or something. Certain it was they failed to touch Kate Brewser's heart, and she reviewed the different candidates for her hand "in maiden meditation, fancy free." Offers she had, and plenty, flirtations none. She never descended to them. It was not in her nature, or consistent with her creed of honour, to encourage any man in the enter-

tainment of the belief she cared for him when she did not. She was a brave, honest girl, greatly to be envied, said the world. But at the same time she was so diffident, so incredulous of her power to charm, apart from her fortune, that she had well-nigh brought herself to believe that there did not exist on the face of this wide earth an individual disinterested enough to love her for her own sake; wherein Mary Whitbread, who as a bystander saw most of the game, and not only appreciated Kate's sterling qualities, but knew how thoroughly calculated she was to make any real good fellow happy, told her, and told her not once but many times, that she erred, and was in danger of ruining her future prospects.

CHAPTER III.

THE crisp brown leaves were falling fast. Their short span of life was at an end, as fluttering softly one by one to the ground they rested peacefully on the bosom of mother earth. The hedges began to droop and their foliage to wither, the luxuriant woodbine's long tendrils shrivelled and shrank, the flowers hid their pretty heads away, and the hardy bramble, clothed in autumnal tints of red and yellow, did its best to enliven the aspect of vegetable decline, while already clusters of wizened scarlet berries betokened the not far distant approach of another hunting season.

And who amongst us, loving the "sport of kings," and enjoying health and fortune wherewith to participate in its delights, has not ere now rejoiced in such yearly recurring symptoms of Nature's wintry sleep? Rejoiced with a glad heart at the gradual clearing of ditches, and thinning of hedges, and stripping of bough and bush, and welcomed

as an old friend the first crisp frosty mornings which recall many a well-remembered run and stirring thirty minutes over the broad and undulating pastures for which Huntingshire is justly celebrated; mornings when the trusty steed has had to strain every nerve in order to keep within view of the flying pack, that breast high tore along with astonishing speed and stoutness, close in the wake of its travel-stained fox.

It wanted still ten days, however, to the regular inauguration of the hunting season—ten days to that formal and ceremonious epoch, the first publicly advertised meet—when men, doffing the distinct comforts of pot hat, blucher boots, gaiters, and eccentric checks, affording any amount of scope to the individual fancy of the wearer, appeared in the somewhat doubtful glory of glossy tiles, scarlet coats, spotless leathers, immaculate tops of the last fashionable hue, and ties whose scrupulous neatness compelled admiration for the deftness of the masculine fingers that had tied them; while the fair sex, not to be outdone, donned the latest triumph in the way of exquisitely fitting habits, moulded to

the figure by artists of such repute as Messrs. Höhne, Creed, Stechlebach, and Co.

Nevertheless cub-hunting was in full swing, and so great had been the sport already shown even at this early period by Sir Beauchamp Lenard's hounds, that several of his staunchest supporters and keenest brother sportsmen congregating from different parts of the world had put in an appearance in the hopes of a few preparatory gallops to the opening day.

Therefore the little town of Foxington was waking up from its normal condition of stagnation, throwing off its summer slumbers, and putting on that air of life and general activity which characterised it during the months of the hunting season. For some weeks past, every morning, weather permitting, at an early hour, long strings of sleek conditioning horses, enveloped from ear to quarter in warm hoods and monogrammed clothing, were to be seen, sniffing the keen air through their distended nostrils, and looking warily around with sidelong glances, as giving an occasional switch of the tail they marched demurely by. Later on in the

day, somewhere between morning and afternoon feeds, grooms, and helpers were wont to assemble in small knots of twos and threes, hanging about the angles of the principal street, interchanging words of welcome, imparting the last piece of gossip or scandal, and failing that, falling back on a severely impartial discussion of the respective studs under their charge, and the merits and demerits of their respective employers, which latter invariably proved an interesting and favourite topic of conversation.

As is customary in such cases, the public-houses were the first to benefit by the renewed activity and stimulus to trade. Indeed, the bar of that celebrated place of resort, The Rest and be Thankful Inn, fully sustained a cognomen so attractive to the weary traveller; for in part owing to the charms and feminine fascinations of the landlady's daughter, the fair Miss Melissa Smith, and in part to those of a highly superior and greatly appreciated brow of home-made ale, the taproom was at this season of the year usually thronged with customers—customers, too, of a most distinguished

order, consisting in chief part of respectable stud grooms, butlers, and those exceedingly fastidious and elegant individuals who are known by the name of "gentlemen's gentlemen," and who often are more dainty and delicate than their masters themselves.

The inhabitants of Foxington just now seemed to have been seized with a sudden fit of cleanliness, and on all sides the scrubbing of doorsteps grown green through damp and disuse, the forcing open of paint-stuck windows, the adorning of the same with smart white curtains, and a free application of whitewash, betokened the expected arrival of visitors.

The town of Foxington itself was a small, old-fashioned, unpretentious place situated on a level flat, round which the country rose gently in every direction. It was bounded on the north and east by a sluggish brook, which in summer time revealed a muddy, unsavoury bottom, but which during heavy rains was apt to overflow its banks and inundate the principal thoroughfare, in which were localized the best patronized shops. At these, thanks chiefly to the ignorance of the

bachelor element of the community, who so long as their wants were gratified, cared little for the cost, most of the necessaries of life could be purchased at truly extortionate prices, greatly exceeding those of the metropolis.

If some individual, more venturesome or long-headed than his fellows, attempted to remonstrate on this preposterous state of affairs, he was well snubbed for his pains, the sleek tradesmen either explaining blandly or expostulating indignantly, but in either case with similar results. The foe retired discomfited, the honest vendor of goods triumphed and continued his prosperous career; for as Mr. Merton the saddler, who, having contrived to amass a large fortune, was looked upon as a great authority, sagely remarked to his friend and neighbour Mr. Cowley, the opulent grocer, when discussing the matter confidentially over an evening glass of whiskey punch, "The long and short of the 'ole thing is this, Cowley. Them as can hafford to 'unt can hafford to pay like gentlemen, and them as can't 'ad better keep away. They're no good to nobody, and

nobody wants 'em in this part of the world. It's all very well in your provincial countries, but *we*”—with an unmistakable intonation of pride—“*we* are a cut habove that.”

And Mr. Merton inflated his capacious chest, and looked as if he really thought himself and Mr. Cowley, as Foxingtonians born and bred, superior to all the rest of mankind.

Such sentiments, however, appeared to Mr. Cowley to be fraught with so much common-sense, that they elicited his entire approval and most cordial sympathy, at the same time encouraging him to maintain his tariff of prices unaltered, and by no means to make that change in the cost of black pepper and loaf sugar which in a weak moment he had rashly contemplated, but which he now clearly perceived was quite unworthy of him.

Mr. Cowley's shop occupied a prominent position half way down the High Street, which latter terminated abruptly in an open space, or sort of square, surrounded by red brick houses, in the centre of which stood the church, a building laying claim to great

antiquity and architectural beauty. It was built of solid grey stone, from whose crevasses sprang bunches of green moss and lichen. The windows were quaintly latticed with ivy-grown arches, and the massive doors curiously wrought in iron, while the tall, slender spire stood out as a beacon for miles around. Some couple of hundred yards further off you came upon the market place. Here, every Thursday, rested droves of meek-eyed, long-horned cattle; fat porkers whose shrill, squeaking voices were loudly raised in self-defence each time the blue-bloused butcher attempted to prod them in the ribs; timid sheep huddled together in crowded pens; rough-coated, shaggy-tailed colts, quacking ducks, cackling hens, smelling fish, hardened cheeses, meat, bloaters, gingerbread, cheap crockery, and female finery, boots, shoes, toys, sweets, oranges, apples, lemons, in short, goods and chattels of every description, displayed either on the ground or on rudely constructed booths, round which the neighbouring farmers with their wives and daughters congregated. Here, too—presumably for the sake of cheer-

fulness, that of cleanliness or quietude being out of the question for this one day in every week—were situated the majority of those diminutive and unpretentious looking dwellings, overshadowed by palatial stables some six times their own size, which in Foxington were considered the hunting box proper ; dwellings which, owing to the mysterious passion for what our friends over the water term “*la chasse*,” were capable of affording accommodation to luxurious men and women, living in the best circles, and who in the ordinary course of events, and were it not for the attraction of hunting, would turn up their aristocratic noses at such pokey habitations.

Some of these houses had been oddly named by their inmates. The Snuggery and The Retreat were only divided by a handsome stone-faced seminary for young ladies, whereat the daughters of opulent graziers and yeomen received a liberal education, while some eccentric individual, doubtless of the masculine order, had actually so far outraged the proprieties as to christen his abode The Loose Box. Others again rejoiced in

the high-sounding, and it must be confessed somewhat inappropriate titles of Bellevue Mansion, Beauchamp House, &c., while the sporting element found vent in Fox Villa, Covert Lodge, and Hunt Hall.

On the evening of Thursday, October the 22nd, 188—, four men were seated round the dinner table of the hospitable residence known as The Retreat. A bottle of first-rate Château Lafitte—warmed to a nicety—was being freely discussed, while the quartette, rendered thoroughly comfortable in mind and body by a most excellent repast, gave themselves up to the pleasure—no slight one—of talking over in all its bearings, and from every point of view, the brilliant sport that had been afforded that very morning during a racing five-and-twenty minutes over the cream of the country by the flying ladies of Sir Beauchamp Lenard's pack, who by good luck had happened on an old dog fox in an outlying field, and were not to be denied.

“By Jove! Clinker, my boy!” exclaimed Terence McGrath, a plump, volatile little man of some five or six-and-thirty years of age, speaking in a strong brogue, which

displayed his nationality, addressing himself to his host, a tall, good-looking young fellow, "that's what I call something *like* a run—a downright clipper from start to finish. Could not have been better had it taken place in the most favoured months of the season instead of during the cub-hunting. Bedad! but I never thought for one moment, when Pretty Lass stole through the hedge into the stubble beyond, and enticed all the young hounds after her, that there was going to be such a deuce of a scent! Why the beauties flew, literally flew," concluded Mr. McGrath with Hibernian enthusiasm.

"They certainly went an uncommon pace," assented the other. "It's not often one sees hounds travel faster, even in this country, than they did to-day."

"Faith! but that's true enough. The pace was something terrific. Gad!" and Mr. McGrath thumped the mahogany triumphantly by way of giving forcible expression to his words, "old Juniper had to bustle along and put his best leg foremost to live with them at all at all."

"Without wishing to wound the natural

pride of a master possessing so distinguished an animal," returned Colonel Clinker with good-humoured sarcasm, "may I be allowed to inquire which *is* old Juniper's best leg? It strikes me any selection would be most invidious under the circumstances."

"Come, shut up, Jack. None of your chaff."

"Well, but Terry," returned the other laughing, "you must admit that old Juniper's understandings are not much to boast of."

"Nor are a good many folks," replied Mr. McGrath, with severe reprisal. "However, I'll tell you exactly how it was. You know, Jack"—and his voice here dropped somewhat of its severity, and assumed a semi-apologetic tone—"that poor old Juniper's hocks were originally fired over in Ireland, when he was only a four-year-old. In my native counthree they consider prevention better than cure, and last winter, when he got that infernal splinter of wood in the off-fore-fetlock joint, which literally played the devil with it, firing seemed the last resource. So says I to the vet. when he came, 'Begor-

rah ! my man, but we had better make a clean job this time all round, for it would be a damned unhandsome thing of us to leave one leg out in the cold, and render it conspicuous like. So we'll make 'em all match, and then they can start quite fair and square again.' The vet. looked me full in the face and said, 'Sir, I honour you. Your humanity is truly beautiful.' Whereupon the operation was performed without more ado. It took place last spring, and this is the first time I have been on the old horse's back since then, but he galloped in rare good form, and if he only stands sound after to-day will serve me faithfully for many a year to come. Bedad ! but he's not likely to have such a breather again in a hurry. Lord, how we raced !"

Mr. McGrath chuckled audibly as he complacently recalled the doughty deeds performed that morning, for self-satisfaction happened to be one of this gentleman's idiosyncracies. He chose, however, utterly to ignore the fact that his varied exploits, feats, marvellous doings, and escapes in the hunting field proved a source of constant amuse-

ment to the Foxington world, which was ill-natured enough to assert that most of Mr. McGrath's statements were highly coloured, and often devoid the smallest substratum of truth.

His imagination might command a certain amount of admiration, but only at the expense of his veracity. Such was the verdict passed upon Mr. McGrath's sporting adventures by the public at large, who it is to be feared regarded the loquacious and quick-witted Irishman in the light of an impostor, at least so far as riding was concerned.

"You've made a capital start anyhow, old man," said Jack Clinker, who knew his friend's little harmless weakness by heart, and regarded it with magnanimous indulgence. "It's very evident, Terry, that the brilliant nerve for which you are so renowned has not disappeared since last winter. I only wish I could say the same for mine. Increasing years, heavy dinners, late nights, and long cheroots are not particularly conducive to courage, so it is pleasant in your case to witness so gallant an exception. I'm awfully glad, old chap"—with a covert wink

at the other guests—"that, *according to your own account*, you were so well up, and really saw something of the run. It would be hard to say which of the two deserves the most credit, you or old Juniper."

"Honours are easy," returned Mr. McGrath. "But"—after a moment's reflection, during which he appeared to detect some hidden irony in his companion's speech—"I like your cheek. What do you mean by saying, '*according to my own account?*' Isn't it good enough for you? Do you doubt my word? Do you consider me *capable* of exaggeration? Have you *ever* known me distort facts, or speak anything but the truth on all occasions?"

"Never," replied Jack Clinker with ludicrous solemnity. "You are a perfect specimen of candour and honesty."

"Very well then," continued Terry, working himself up into a state of excitement. "Perhaps you'll admit I've not hunted here all these years without knowing as much about hunting as my neighbours. Faith! but there are some people born so sceptical that they will hardly believe their own mother

brought them into the world, and I really think you are one of them, Jack. Once for all, let me tell you it's not in my nature to magnify anybody's performances in the hunting field, least of all my own ; and what's more, it is not always those who talk the most, and who puff themselves up, who are the best sportsmen."

And Mr. McGrath drew his portly person on high as much as to say, "There, what do you say to that?"

"Hear, hear!" interrupted the Honble. Jack Clinker, Colonel in Her Majesty's Grenadier Guards, approvingly. "A most laudable and commendable sentiment. Post prandial Nimrods are plentiful enough, are they not, Terry? Pluck and fluency are boon companions when no more formidable obstacle presents itself than the polished mahogany laden with bottles. Ah, Bacchus! thou art a merry fellow, and a right good one to boot! Which reminds me thou hast suffered neglect too long. Come, Terry, old chappie, pass the claret this way. We are uncommonly thirsty on our side of the table, and your innings is fairly over for the present."

"You're pat enough with your tongue, Jack; you always were," observed Mr. McGrath, whose offended dignity had not yet been restored to its pedestal. "And I flatter myself I can take chaff as well as most people, but as for going hard in the hunting field, well, I never pretend to be a crack-brained, harum-scarum fellow like yourself, who can't even get within a hundred yards of a fence without wanting to cram at it like a downright lunatic."

"Don't be abusive, Terry. Remember I am not to be held responsible for the deficiencies of my cerebral condition. Some scientific cove, I believe, stated the fact that only one in five hundred human beings is born with decent intelligence; therefore do not be too hard on the four hundred and ninety-nine. It's unkind."

"*That's not my* idea of riding to hounds," continued Mr. McGrath, completely ignoring the other's remark, "though"—with withering contempt—"it seem's to be some people's. Pluck is all very well, but there are a great many other qualities essential before a really fine horseman can be pro-

duced. Valour without discretion resembles the clumsy beast of the field, utterly deficient of all reason. What say you, Fuller ?”

“ That Mr. McGrath’s power of language and choice of metaphor is simply beautiful,” returned the gentleman thus appealed to. “ What would I not give to possess such grace and fluency ? ”

Captain Fuller, like Colonel Clinker, was evidently well aware of poor Terry’s peculiarities. He looked with an air of friendly commiseration at Mr. McGrath’s stout and substantial form, at the short little legs, so eminently unsuited to the adornment of a top boot, and at the capaciously rotund waistcoat, which, alas ! already possessed a well-defined curve, that, according to our artistic education, we are taught to appreciate as the line of beauty, but whose convexity, as displayed in the masculine form, fails to please the untutored eye. Perhaps Captain Fuller was devoid of culture, for at that moment ran through his mind the possibility of even the line of beauty being misapplied. He became distinctly conscious of the great advantages he himself possessed

in the shape of an exquisitely symmetrical calf and a spare and slender figure, capable of fearlessly appearing in that, under some circumstances, most trying garment, a swallow-tailed coat. The knowledge induced him to deal compassionately with his neighbours' foibles, and to withhold in a measure the caustic remarks which often ere now had made many a man wince, and for which the severe and astute Captain was renowned. Lithe and active, bearing his forty-five years lightly, the ex-Carabineer's countenance was not unlike that of some dried-up old mummy. The skin was drawn very tightly over the cranium, and presented a yellow, faded appearance; the eyes were prominent and keen, the nose straight, brow and jaw square, giving evidence of great determination, and the whole expression of the face curiously impassive and inscrutable.

Ill-natured people whispered varied things of Captain Fuller's antecedents; but few of us in this world are fortunate enough to escape the *sotto voce* remarks of our neighbours.

Nevertheless, hardly anyone appeared really acquainted with the mysteries of his early

career, and the Foxington world had come to accept him as the best ecarté player, the most inveterate gambler, the coolest hand, the most amusing story teller, and greatest authority on sporting matters (Colonel Clinker alone excepted) in the place. Added to these qualifications Captain Fuller rode undeniably well to hounds, was in with all the dealers, and never refused a decent profit for a young horse. He rarely meddled in other people's affairs unless directly invited to do so, and kept a singularly quiet tongue in his head with reference to his own. When asked his opinion on any subject he gave it with a decision and a promptitude which carried weight, and had gained for him a reputation for wisdom and cleverness perhaps greater even than he was fairly entitled to.

“What is it you want to know, McGrath?” he asked, raising his eyebrows in a slightly supercilious manner. “Whether valour should be tempered with discretion, eh? Why, of course it should, and in nine cases out of ten generally is. The majority of men funk at heart if only they had the

courage to acknowledge it, but instead of doing so, when they come to a nasty place they take great pains to explain how they fully intended jumping it, only they thought the ground was too hard, or there really was no occasion, or they feared they might stake their horse—any excuse, in short, that comes to the mind. However, talking of a combination of the two qualities, I was fortunate enough to witness a very striking instance of it this morning. Do you happen, McGrath, by any chance to remember that first little blind gap we came to just when the hounds had begun to settle to their work? The ditch was towards you, and almost completely overgrown with long yellow grass. Well, you came up to it, and you looked at it, and from the expression of your face I could have sworn some such thought as this ran through your mind: ‘Dear me! What an uncommonly awkward obstacle, to be sure! Exactly the sort of nasty, deceptive, trappy place for a horse to make a mistake at, especially when he’s fresh, and come blundering head foremost on to his nose.’ At that moment you were brimful of courage, but you refrained from

doing anything rash. Your discretion was of the highest order. Still, by the time you had waited a few minutes, during which hounds were streaming away in the distance, and the passage of some twenty horsemen had cleared the way, and reduced the dangerous nature of the impediment to a minimum, you took heart. 'Hang it all!' you said once more; 'it's not such a bad place after all. Here goes for a shy at it.' Valour, you see, here came to the front. Your mind was made up, and without further hesitation you charged the reduced gap, with that heroic and indomitable courage born of an empty flask and stimulated spirits for which you are so deservedly esteemed by a large and admiring circle of friends. But now—what does that beggar, old Juniper, do? Does he feel impelled by the same eager desire for distinction as his ambitious rider? No, not he. He whips round with such velocity as considerably to disturb Mr. McGrath's centre of gravity, gives an obstinate shake of that wicked old head of his, as much as to say, 'No, no, my friend; every dog has his day. When I was keen on jumping a little while

ago you hung on to my bit and declined. Now I do the same. You had your doubts; permit me to entertain mine.' Whereupon, having in the interim spied a convenient gate some twenty yards or so to the right, which a couple of stout farmers on sturdy cobs had just succeeded in opening, he made promptly for it, like a sensible and confidential animal. And now, Terry, your judgment came to the fore, for had you been a regular bruiser, like our friend Clinker here, you would probably have remained at that blessed gap for the best part of an hour endeavouring to force the obstinate brute over it, and by so doing lost your temper and your run at the same time. But you, like a true philosopher, and considering the valour already exhibited amply sufficient, discreetly yielded to old Juniper's better judgment, and by your own telling, after passing through the gate, must have made most wonderful dispatch, since I gather from your statements that you had pretty well the best of the run throughout. I drink to valour and discretion in the persons of Mr. Terence McGrath and old Juniper, than whom no

worthier representatives could possibly be found in all Huntingshire."

And Captain Fuller raised his glass and drained the contents with evident approval of their quality.

His speech was greeted by a chorus of laughter, while a complacent smile overspread Mr. McGrath's ruddy countenance, for curiously enough, sharp as he was at detecting a joke at another person's expense, his share of the national vanity was so great as to render him perfectly proof against any but the bluntest sarcasm, while Captain Fuller's witticisms were so insidious, so artfully intermingled with judicious flattery, that they not only failed to wound Terry's susceptibilities, but actually restored him to a state of high good-humour and self-satisfaction.

"Ha, ha! a capital story!" exclaimed Colonel Clinker. "But I say, Fuller, if it is not an impertinent question, how did you yourself come to witness all this bye-play that you have so ably narrated? It's mighty seldom *you* stand looking on and allow some twenty horsemen to take precedence, even if

the obstacle be not a more formidable one than a blind gap. Come, what were you about?"

"Well, to tell the truth," answered Captain Fuller, "being rather short of horses at present, owing to that beastly influenza having broken out in the stable, and never thinking for a second hounds were likely to run in the way they did, I merely rode out on my hack, intending to potter about. She is only a four-year-old, quite a pony, and as ignorant as a baby where jumping is concerned. Knowing, therefore, that she could not possibly get over the fences, more especially in their present leafy state, I contented myself with bringing up the rear, and making sundry judicious cuts along the roads whenever they were possible. I should be sorry to say how many of my neighbours I came across, or what curious phases of character revealed themselves to my observant eyes. It's wonderful what a lot one sees. I know almost every shirker in the field. The Grangeton brook was rare fun. I made a first-rate nick just about that time, and got on to the road, which runs almost parallel

with it, exactly when the leading men came charging down at the water. I tell you what, Clinker, that's a rare good nag you were riding to-day, not the bay, the one you rode home, but that young roan mare who carried you so brilliantly through the run. By Jove! She's a nailer! She flew the brook like a bird. I never saw anything prettier in my life. You happened to pick out rather a nasty place, where the banks were steep and undermined, and although the mare had nothing in front to give her a lead, she never hesitated one single second, but pricked her ears and went at it straight as a die. I have not seen an animal that takes my fancy so much for a long time. She jumps in such beautiful form, so light and quick, just like a stag. I bet a bob she must have covered close upon twenty feet when she took the brook."

"It was a pretty tidy jump for a young un," said Jack Clinker, who, little as he was given to brag about his own performances, like all true lovers of the noble animal, dearly liked, when he possessed a good conveyance, to hear its praises sounded. "I

picked her up this summer when down at Newmarket with the Governor. She's clean thoroughbred, by Hyperion out of Emerald. You may, perhaps, recollect the dam. She is an Irish mare, not unknown to fame, having about six years ago won one of the big steeplechases at Punchestown, while Hyperion has some of the finest blood in the country running through his veins, as everyone who has studied his stud book is aware of. Directly I set eyes on Opal—that is the young un's name—I fell in love with her. I knew she was bound to race and jump, not only from her pedigree, but from her make and shape. If you were to cast your eye over her you would be surprised how deep she is in the girth, and what great square hips she has got. She wants furnishing, but her bone and muscle are quite remarkable for a four-year-old. She belonged to a racing farmer, who knew her value. For a long time the price proved a stopper, ready money just then happening to be even more scarce than usual. As good luck would have it, however, I managed to bring off a coup at the July meeting, part of which I imme-

diately expended in the purchase of the mare, a purchase which since then I have seen no cause to regret. A man ought not, perhaps, to praise his own cattle, but though I say it who should not, Opal, bar none, is the very best four-year-old I ever threw a leg over. She is handsome as paint, bold as a lion, and clever as a cat. As for jumping, it comes naturally to her. She never saw hounds until to-day, although of course she has done a bit of quiet schooling at home."

"Well, she could not have gone better, had she been the most mature old hunter," said Captain Fuller. "And what's more, she ought to win between the flags. Has she any turn of speed?"

"Speed! I should rather think she had. It's extraordinary how she gets over the ground with that long, sweeping stride of hers. Of course hunting is a different thing altogether to racing, nevertheless you know to-day how fast hounds went, fast enough at any rate for most of them, but they never succeeded in extending Opal. From first to last she was going well within herself, and hardly turned a hair. No, if only she grows

the right way, unless I am greatly mistaken, she is good enough to pull off one of our big steeplechases."

Now it is a common enough delusion of most gentlemen possessing a second-rate animal, who can gallop a trifle faster than its companions in the hunting-field, that the said animal is likely to prove a mine of wealth, and has been a hitherto undiscovered treasure, whose light only requires to be rescued from the bushel in order to shine forth, and take the sporting world by storm. Jack Clinker, however, was well qualified to give an opinion, and was not likely to be led astray in his judgments through any momentary enthusiasm occasioned by Captain Fuller's encomiums. In all matters connected with sport he was thoroughly conversant. His knowledge and experience were alike considerable, for at the early age of thirty he had attained the proud position of being recognised as the finest rider, the best man to hounds, and the most successful gentleman jockey, both on the flat and between the flags, of the day. So great indeed had his prestige become, that it was almost sufficient for it to be

known beforehand the Honble. Jack Clinker would ride any given horse in a race, for that horse immediately to be installed favourite. Like the invincible Archer, he had his herd of blindly-worshipping followers. At cross-country meetings his success was astonishing, while even professional jockeys respected him as no unworthy opponent, and pronounced him, for an amateur, "a wonderful good judge of pace." His friends—and they were legion—declared Jack Clinker to be the best fellow in the world, whose only fault consisted in a harrowing impetuosity, which at times led him into considerable difficulties; while his enemies—for what man has none?—took pleasure in asserting he was a regular scapegrace, a ne'er-do-weel, and a shamefully extravagant young dog.

Whichever party might be right, despite sundry scrapes and adventures, chiefly of a financial nature, not a soul had ever breathed a word against Jack Clinker's honour, or accused him of any impropriety in connection with his transactions on the turf. If he were, as was generally admitted, *sans peur*,

he was equally *sans reproche*. Colonel Clinker's father—Lord Nevis—a rare old gentleman of a fast dying-out school, had inherited the title and a heavily mortgaged estate through the unexpected demise of a somewhat distant relative. Lord Nevis spent most of his days upon the property, struggling hard to free it of encumbrance, so that at his death it might be handed down clear of debt to his only son, whose comfortable settlement was his one great wish. To effect this result, the unselfish and devoted father economised in every possible way; often, indeed, depriving himself of luxuries to which, by his age and position, he was fairly entitled, while, if the truth will out, Master Jack made such frequent applications to the family purse as very quickly to dispose of any small surplus accruing therein. Put into the Guards at an early age, Jack's chief difficulty had always lain in endeavouring to make both ends meet. An allowance of eight hundred a year proved totally insufficient to defray the debts he incurred. Generous to a fault, open handed and kind hearted, with a perfect passion for horse-

flesh and sport of every description, up till now he had found it impossible to live within his income. His resolutions were excellent, and his desire to retrench sincere, yet somehow or other at the end of each year the same old story repeated itself. Bills came pouring in, and money wherewith to meet them was not forthcoming. Now and again, when his lucky star was in the ascendant, Jack Clinker managed to pull off some "good thing" on the turf, the proceeds of which, impartially divided among his numerous creditors, served for a space to stay their clamorous tongues, and staved off the evil day; but alas! these "good things" were few and far between, oftentimes succeeded by shockingly bad ones, during which poor Jack went about in a dejected mood, cogitating the alternatives of an immediate and comprehensive scheme of reform, or an abode in that last retreat of the destitute, *i.e.*, the workhouse. Nevertheless, so sanguine was Colonel Clinker by temperament, and possessed of such a strong vitality, that even when most bowed down by difficulties he firmly believed in something or other turning

up. The final crash certainly loomed in the distance, and year after year appeared more and more imminent, but by hook or by crook the crisis had hitherto been delayed, while in the meantime the gallant Colonel's life was not otherwise than a pleasant one. In the summer he idled about town, forming one of the highly-esteemed "gardenia division," attended all the smart parties given by the leaders of society, was idolized by fashionable spinsters and professional beauties, went to every race meeting almost in the United Kingdom, from 'Appy 'Ampton to aristocratic Goodwood; later on shot grouse and slaughtered stags on his own native hills, paid innumerable visits, contrived to kill time more or less successfully until the hunting season came round, and altogether spent as pleasant, profitless an existence as generally falls to the lot of young men possessing just enough to keep them in idleness, to the detriment of all their higher qualities and legitimate ambitions. Jack Clinker was no fool. He had fallen into a groove which, on the whole, suited him fairly well; still, in his more serious moods, he fully recognised the

fact that it might be wise to turn over a new leaf; only the pages of the book had stuck together, and a commencement was so hard to make!

At the present moment he was supremely happy, recalling Opal's meritorious performances, and looking forward to an excellent season's sport. During the winter months, in common with his argumentative but staunch ally Terence McGrath, he rented the snug little hunting box at Foxington, in which we find the pair located, and which their numerous friends had, owing to one or two uninvited visitors who occasionally put in an unwelcome appearance, facetiously christened The Retreat. Captain Fuller lived next door but one, and surrounded as he was by a halo of mystery, had nevertheless contrived to establish himself on terms of tolerable intimacy. Although possessed of no ostensible means, the Captain was one of those fortunate individuals, who, living no one knows how, are quite content so long as they enjoy the best of everything at a neighbour's expense. With this end in view, he had constituted himself dry nurse to a wealthy inexperienced

young man, one Robert Grahame, son of a millionaire merchant, whom he had persuaded into making his *début* in the hunting field. The fatherly interest he took in this youth, familiarly known as the Chirper, was truly beautiful to behold. He relieved him of all trouble, managed his stud for him, ordered in the forage, rode any awkward or fractious horses, engaged the servants, wrote out long lists of delicacies to be obtained from the stores, paid all the household bills regularly once a week, harangued the tradespeople, and in return for such inestimable services demanded nothing but an occasional cheque wherewith to keep things going. And Mr. Grahame, who hated trouble, and who received from his wealthy parent just as many thousands as Jack Clinker did hundreds a year, with an injunction to boot, to spend his money royally, conceived that he could not possibly be obeying the parental wishes better than by allowing Captain Fuller to constitute himself administrator-in-chief of the finances ; an arrangement which afforded that gentleman infinite satisfaction, and which so far appeared to have suited Mr. Grahame

equally well. This latter had only come to Foxington towards the end of the last hunting season ; but, thanks to his friend Captain Fuller's representations, and thanks partly to his own liberality and good nature, had found himself so cordially received—not only by the sporting members of the community, but also by the mothers and daughters of several of the county families—that, gratified by such a gracious reception, he had resolved on the bold step of renting a small house in Foxington and setting up in partnership with Captain Fuller. Naturally somewhat shy, and of a retiring disposition, he not only in all things allowed that gentleman to take the lead, but effaced himself so completely that strangers were apt to put him down as a bigger fool than he was. Robert Grahame went through the world with open but good-humoured eyes, and being at the same time both indolent and rich, had no objection to be preyed upon by his friends up to a certain point. Captain Fuller had the sense to understand this, and never to go beyond the boundary line. Hence their apparent sympathy and cordiality.

There comes a time when even the subject of a good run may be worn threadbare, and conversation for lack of incident begins to droop. So it was now. Every fence had been recalled, the performances of each individual horse and rider discussed, the blindness of the country animadverted upon, and the appearance of hounds and handling of huntsman freely criticised, until at length a pause resulted—a pause, however, which Mr. McGrath, whose chief merit certainly *did not* lay in silence, quickly proceeded to break by an interrogation which he evidently considered of great importance.

“By-the-bye boys,” he asked, “have you heard the news? The news that is, or ought to be, agitating the heart of every blessed bachelor in Foxington. You, Jack, in particular, should feel interested. Such a chance may never come your way again.”

“Indeed, then I had better make haste and profit by it, especially as there seems likely to be a good deal of competition,” returned the Honble. Jack carelessly.

“There’ll be plenty of that I’ll be bound,” said Mr. McGrath with a comical twinkle

of the eye, and looking exceedingly mysterious.

"For goodness sake, Terry, don't be so enigmatical. If you don't look out you'll be a terribly prosy old man some of these days. Get to the point of your story, if any point exists, of which I have my suspicions."

"Well, you *are* a sceptical beggar, if ever there was one. I declare I've half a mind not to tell you after all."

"Don't, Terry, I'm not the least curious."

"You're enough to make a saint swear. I never knew anyone half so provoking. However, curious or not curious, I shall unburthen myself of the information elicited this afternoon. Come, now, what would you say to the arrival of two young ladies on the scene of action—both young, both good-looking, and one of them rich. So rich, indeed, that they say she does not know what to do with her money, or how to spend it."

"I always mistrust what 'they say,'" responded Jack coolly, puffing a cloud of smoke from the long cigar he had just lighted. "'They say' is the most inveterate scandal-monger in the world, and at the same time

the most untrustworthy one. Who are 'they?' Answer me that question. Can *you* point them out? Can *anybody* point them out? However, if you ask my opinion, that's a different matter altogether. *I* say the young lady to whom you allude must either be a phenomenon or an idiot. I can conceive of no intermediate condition. To be the happy possessor of more money than one knows what to do with appears to my limited comprehension an utterly impossible state of affairs. I cannot bring myself to believe in it. The very mention of such a thing conjures up dim visions of bliss."

"Visions which might come true," murmured Mr. McGrath under his breath.

"Where did you pick up this exciting piece of news?" asked the Chirper, displaying an unusual amount of interest, most gratifying to Terry's feelings of self-importance, which had been rather damped by the Colonel's indifference. "Is your informant to be relied upon? I hope so, for two nice girls would be a great addition."

"Well done, Chirper; your sentiments do you honour," exclaimed Mr. McGrath ap-

provingly. "Nevertheless, in asking such a question you display profound ignorance. There is but one person in this neighbourhood capable of answering to the term 'informant,' and she is *facile princeps*! If you want to know the intimate affairs of your bosom friend, better almost than he does himself, ask Mrs. Forrester. If you wish to be posted in the latest fashionable scandal, the ailments of every animal in the county, with the means to cure them, the peccadillos of the fair sex, the last *bon mot* among the men, again, I say, ask Mrs. Forrester. That woman is a regular walking encyclopædia. How she manages to retain so much knowledge would baffle the holy St. Patrick himself. Nothing escapes her! She's just as sharp and as clever as she can hang together. Gad," bringing his plump red hand with a resounding smack down on the table with such force as to make all the empty glasses jingle, "if Mrs. Forrester were only some twenty years younger, and was not nearly old enough to be my mother, I declare I know no woman I have a greater respect for or would sooner ask to become Mrs. T."

"I was not aware up till this moment," remarked Captain Fuller, "that the sentiment which prompted people to commit matrimony consisted of respect alone. However, since you entertain such extremely sensible views, I can tender no better advice under the circumstances than 'Go in, my boy, and win.'"

"Yes, go in my boy and win," laughed the others in a chorus.

"Thanks for your good wishes," said Mr. McGrath with melo-dramatic accents, "but my friends," and here he gave a solemn shake of the head, "widows, even the most fascinating, are a dangerous class, besides which a man does wrong to place himself in a position where comparisons are sure to be drawn, and generally to his disadvantage. A second husband is a striking exception to the adage, '*Les absents ont toujours tort.*' The dead cannot rise up to disprove facts and contradict statements, and for this reason—No. 1, once safely under the sod, is invariably right, and No. 2 invariably wrong. Therefore I have no fancy for becoming No. 2, however much I esteem the lady. I am too chivalrous by

nature to desire to do the defunct Colonel Forrester's memory such injury."

"I suppose you and the old woman have been chattering together as usual," said Colonel Clinker. "What else did she tell you? Did you meet her in the town?"

"Certainly," returned Mr. McGrath with a comical assumption of dignity. "I disapprove of clandestine assignations even though the female be aged—"

"Say rather *because*," interrupted Captain Fuller with a laugh.

"Sly dog," said Mr. McGrath. "However, to get on with my story; this afternoon after my ride, feeling a bit stiff and sore, and finding the sitting position attended with a certain amount of discomfort, I determined to stretch my legs by going for a short stroll up the street. The first person I met was Mrs. Forrester, who, having divested herself of her habit, had driven in to fetch some medicine for a sick cow at the chemist's."

"‘Come here,’ she said to me, ‘I’ve something to tell you. You’ve heard the news of course?’"

"I was obliged to confess, that having only

arrived yesterday, I was somewhat behind the times, and consequently not posted in the topics of the Foxington day."

"‘Well then,’ continued Mrs. Forrester. ‘Sport Lodge is let for the season. Let to a young lady, Miss Brewser by name, who it appears is a great heiress, and what’s more, she is one of our set, for she is fond of hunting. There is a companion—a Miss Whitbread, and they both came to-day. I sent my groom down to the station, on purpose to have a look round. The horses arrived by the 3.30 train, I have just this instant seen them go by. There was no mark on the clothing, so I stopped the man and asked him whom they belonged to. Three hunters, a pair of uncommonly smart cobs, a hack, and a brougham horse formed the lot. One of the hunters—a chestnut, looked a perfect beauty, and the bay took my fancy also. Depend upon it the money is all right, and just think what a chance for some of you young men! There’s Clinker for instance—you tell him from me to keep his weather eye open. Such plums as this Miss Brewser require care and delicate handling, they do not grow on

every tree, but though they hang high, once now and again they are apt to fall with a real good thud to the ground. Don't forget, but be sure and give Jack my message.' So saying Mrs. Forrester whipped up her horse and departed."

"Hang it all," growled the Honourable Jack, "why the devil can't people leave me alone? I hate hunting women. Most confounded bores, who get in your way on every occasion, can't ride one little bit, and yet who, to make matters worse, have any amount of pluck, a pluck born of sheer ignorance. I declare it makes my blood run cold, to see nine women out of ten come tippitting up to a big place, with no more idea how to go at it properly than the man in the moon, the left hand outstretched grasps the loosely-flapping reins, while the right arm either rises with a flourish into the air at the critical moment, or else makes a feeble and fortunately ineffectual whack at the animal's side just when he is in the act of taking off. And that they consider horsemanship; ugh! don't talk to me of hunting women! With a few exceptions I'm sick of them!"

And Jack, remembering how only last season he had been jumped upon and narrowly escaped complete annihilation by a gorgeous but unfortunate young person attired in a bright-blue habit, with yellow curls and golden brooch and earrings, shuddered in unmistakable disgust at the recollection of this beautiful but untimely apparition, as it had burst upon him when struggling on the small of his back, in a moist ditch, and a pair of brown heels inflicted sundry bumps and bruises on his prostrate form.

“And yet,” said Captain Fuller, “when a woman *can* ride, I know no one who admires her more than yourself. Why you used to rave about Lady P — last year, but anyhow, old chap, you must not allow vulgar prejudice to stand in the way. There are many worse *modus vivendi* than a wealthy marriage. As for a harmless fancy for hunting on the part of the lady—I think nothing of that whatever. Obstacles may intervene, and a baby or two soon takes off the keen edge; whereas, if the money is only secure, well invested, and regularly paid, the chances are

you as the husband, will have the spending of the greater share, and do pretty well what you like with the interest, even if the capital be strictly tied up. Now-a-days nothing opens out so fine a prospect to impecunious youth, as a well-to-do marriage. It is a safe and comfortable haven, not difficult to attain if properly approached. Women love a judicious mixture of hardihood and flattery. Therein lies the whole secret of overcoming their scruples."

"I don't agree with you, Fuller," said Colonel Clinker coldly. "Women are not such fools as you seem to imagine."

The one subject on which he and Captain Fuller never agreed or could agree was that of the fair sex. Jack Clinker thought of his dead mother with reverence. He believed in the purity of women, while Captain Fuller affected to despise it.

"Well, well," returned he, "you can do as you like. After all, too many aspirants are undesirable, and I'm not at all sure I shan't have a cut in at this Miss Brewser myself."

And the Captain, who was exceedingly vain of his personal appearance, twirled his scanty

moustache with a complacency all the more strange, since two at least out of his three listeners were aware of the fact that any matrimonial intentions on his part could only be executed under extreme difficulties.

"Bedad," interposed Terry on behalf of his friend, "but Jack must have the first innings. None of us are so hard up as he is. And if we can do him a good turn we will."

"Thanks, old boy," said Jack with a kindly gleam in his clear eyes, "it's something to have such a backer. Besides which, what you say about my being hard up is sensible enough; things financially don't improve, in fact they get worse and worse, so it's no use attempting to disguise the truth. I shall have to take the bull by the horns, and do something desperate before long, the only difficulty is when—and—how?"

A shadow passed across his open countenance rendering it for a moment unusually serious. There were times, though not of very long duration as a rule, when even Jack Clinker felt depressed by the increasing difficulties of the financial situation.

"We'll settle all that for you," replied Mr.

McGrath cheerfully. "The 'when' shall be this winter, or perhaps in consideration of your both being hunting people, we may allow a little grace, and defer the happy event until the spring, and the 'how,' matrimony. Faith, me dear boy, but I quite agree with our friend Captain Fuller, in thinking that excellent institution a grand refuge for the destitute, so much so that I declare to you I've had serious thoughts of trying it myself, only somehow or other the girls, bless their darling hearts, are fanciful, and require more pin money than I can afford. It's a curious thing, but whenever I propose they begin to laugh, and nothing kills sentiment like ridicule, it shrivels it up just as a cold wind does a roseleaf. Now you, Jack, in spite of your poverty, have looks, position, and exactly that sort of celebrity which the fair sex appreciate. They like a man who is somebody, and who is talked about. Why"—waxing enthusiastic—"the girl would be a born fool who refused to marry the best seat on a horse, and the finest hands in England. She never could do it, the thing is a simple impossibility."

"The young lady might not be possessed of any sporting tendencies, Terry," returned the other with an amused smile, "and then what you are good enough to designate as 'the best seat and the finest hands in England' would be rather thrown away upon her, would they not? It's not exactly complimentary all one's boon companions displaying such exceeding solicitude to get rid of one, and this Miss Brewser is not the only girl in the world with money. I've met others before now, and managed to escape their charms without any serious wound being inflicted on my heart."

"The more fool you, Jack. You are your own worst enemy, and always have been."

"Possibly. But may I ask what you desire? Would you have me, a perfect stranger, without receiving an atom of encouragement, throw myself at this young woman's head, simply because she happens to be, or is reported to be, an heiress? A fellow must be awfully thick-skinned for that sort of work."

"Not at all. I would have you make up to her in a proper and sensible fashion."

There is no occasion to fling yourself at any body's head in the absurd way of which you speak. If any 'flinging' is required, let it be at the lady's feet. She'll not leave you there long I'll be bound. You know, Jack, you're a deuced agreeable fellow when you choose to take the trouble. Come boys, fill your glasses just once more, and drink to the health of Miss Brewster that now is, the Honble. Mrs. Jack Clinker that will be."

"We've had about enough of this stupid chaff," said the bridegroom elect. "Can't you chaps talk of something more sensible?" then, as the toast was repeated, he added as if half speaking his thoughts aloud. "Poor Mrs. Jack! She will have but an indifferent time of it, I'm afraid. A gambling, racing, betting, idle husband, head over ears in debt, and no sooner out of one scrape than into another, is hardly the sort of man for a nice young girl to marry."

"Just the sort of man most of 'em adore," observed Captain Fuller, who happened to over-hear the remark, and enunciated the opinion with a decision probably arising from long experience. "Women may like and

esteem the respectable goody-goody members of society, but their love is reserved for the black sheep."

"You certainly entertain the oddest opinions of the sex," said Colonel Clinker. "However your assurances are exceedingly comforting to those who, like myself, belong to the latter class. According to your theory the bigger blackguard a man is the greater affection he inspires."

"That's about it. Women's hearts are awfully soft, but their heads are weak in proportion. We may thank our stars the majority are not sharper than they are, and are possessed of such sweet credulous natures. Now, I'd like to bet you ten to one, in the event of your proposing to Miss Brewer, that she accepts you."

"That's rather a strong order, is it not?" said Jack Clinker, with increasing impatience. "For goodness sake let's drop the subject."

"There, I have booked it!" said the other, taking out the neatly bound volume from his pocket, without which he seldom stirred. "If you win I pay you ten sovereigns, whereas, in the event of losing, you only pay

me one. The odds are handsome enough in all conscience."

"Done!" said the Colonel, "on the condition I hear no more about it between this and then."

The conversation clashed with his nicer instincts of chivalry, and he wished an end put to it. He felt vaguely irritated and incensed. Therefore he rose from the table, rang the bell, and voted an adjournment to the next room, where the card table was already spread, and all things in readiness for the amusement of the evening. Loo was proposed by Captain Fuller, who overruled the objections of Mr. McGrath, who greatly preferred a quiet rubber of whist at half a crown points. The Captain, however, desired a more lucrative game, being an adept in the art of gambling. So they sat down and played with varying fortunes until the clock struck midnight. Then Colonel Clinker pushed back his chair, and said—

"It seems inhospitable to turn you fellows out, but I make it a rule, in the hunting season, never to keep late hours."

"Just one more round," pleaded Captain.

Fuller, who with glistening eyes was engaged in counting over a little heap of I O U's placed before him. He was in his element now, and the gambler's spirit rife within him, but the Colonel proved inexorable. He had been a steady loser, holding miserable cards, and evidently considered it useless going on, in the face of such bad luck.

"What an insinuating cove that fellow Fuller is to be sure!" he remarked to Terence McGrath, when their guests had departed. "Neither you nor I wanted to play high, and yet he somehow forced it upon us. I've lost close upon a hundred pounds to-night, worse luck."

"He's a rum un," said Terry. "I never can quite make him out. But I say Jack, old fellow, another time I do wish you'd put your foot down, and be firm. If we begin the winter in this sort of way we shall have to finish it in Queer Street. You and I can't afford to lose a hundred pounds at cards."

"I can't for one," Jack said with a sigh, as they went upstairs.

"Brewser," he muttered during the process of undressing. "That's a Scotch name.

I wonder what family this girl belongs to? Ugh! what beasts she would think us, if she had only heard us all discussing her up and down in the way we did to-night. I declare I felt positively ashamed." The fair head was on the pillow by this time. "I'll enter Opal for the Grand National, and win a big coup," with which consoling determination, the Honble. Jack blew out the candle, rolled himself round, and before many minutes were over was sound asleep, dreaming of steeple-chase courses, and runs across country.

CHAPTER IV.

SPORT LODGE, the present residence of the young lady and her friend, who, quite unconsciously, had by their arrival aroused so considerable an amount of curiosity, possessed the advantage of being situated on rising ground, some half-mile distant from the low-lying town of Foxington, which it overlooked. From the modern plate-glass windows of the building, field after field of green undulating pastures, unbroken by plough, or vestige of arable land were to be seen, while on all sides great up-standing bullfinches met the eye, composed of stiff, unyielding blackthorn, fenced in by stout wooden oxers. For the country within a radius of a couple of miles of Foxington was renowned as the biggest in England, none but the best mounted and highest couraged horsemen daring to ride over it. Fortunately, however, gates were plentiful in the immediate neighbourhood, often indeed proving

the only means of egress, straight going being rendered still more difficult by the presence of a canal, a railway, and an un-jumpable brook. Although the surrounding landscape could not, even by the most enthusiastic lover of Nature, be pronounced beautiful, there was in its vast extent, a certain breadth, which as the eye rested on miles of grassy slopes, was not wholly destitute of charm.

Sport Lodge was a square built, old-fashioned comfortable abode, the solid red bricks of which its walls were composed, being mellowed by the hand of time, and the warring of the elements, into a subdued and harmonious tint, which contrasted pleasantly with the glossy leaves of the ivy, clinging to their surface. The house stood in its own grounds, consisting of a short carriage drive, small flower and kitchen gardens, and an extensive paddock. Inside, the rooms, though not exceedingly numerous, were spacious and airy, while the furniture, in spite of being many degrees removed from the lofty standard of cultured æsthetes of the Oscar Wilde school, was neither

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CHAPTER IV.

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glaringly vulgar nor obtrusively hideous, thanks to an abhorrence on the part of Mr. Reginald Rich to anything that might be considered the least loud. Therefore, quiet colours and small patterns predominated, much to both girls' satisfaction, who immediately on their arrival, commenced a searching and exhaustive tour of inspection, accompanied by old Maggie, the latter however being more taken up by the state of the blankets, bedding, and kitchen utensils, than with the taste displayed by the late tenant. The drawing room, as might have been expected, came in for the principal share of abuse, the young ladies inveighing vigorously against the terrible primness of a couple of arm chairs, placed on either side the fire-place, the polished rosewood table, minus a cloth, occupying the exact centre of the apartment, and the frightful precision with which the remaining seats were ranged at equi-distance, around it.

"Did you ever see anything so awful?" ejaculated Kate, though in her heart of hearts she felt conscious things might have been a very great deal worse.

But half an hour's labour worked wonders. The girls hauled about the obnoxious articles and stowed them away in unobtrusive nooks, produced yards upon yards of pretty, bright coloured chintz, with which they draped the mantel-piece, strewed books and knickknacks about the room, stuck up some photographs and Japanese fans on the walls, and in a very short time completely metamorphosed the apartment, bestowing on it that air of refinement and comfort which feminine fingers alone know how to impart.

"There! I declare our drawing-room begins to look more habitable already!" exclaimed Kate, breathlessly pausing for a second in the midst of her exertions to review with triumph the result of her own and Mary Whitbread's joint labours. "I wonder what Mr. Reginald Rich would say?"

"I've no doubt his astonishment would be extreme," replied Mary, with a laugh. "He would think the fairies had been at work amongst his goods and chattels."

"Well," continued Kate, feeling all the satisfaction derived from successful effort, "we have not allowed the grass to grow under

our feet. No one can say, considering we only arrived this morning, that we have wasted our time."

"Certainly not; but you never do, Kate, under any circumstances. Your activity and your energy are something quite remarkable. At least they appear so to me. I do not know what I should do, or how I should manage without you to goad me on. I feel positively certain, if left to myself, I should not accomplish as much in a week as you get through in a single day."

"Oh! yes you would, Mary. It's a mere question of strength. You happen to be the more delicate of the two. Besides which you are blest with a naturally calm, equable, and unexcitable disposition, which, I fear, I do not possess. Nothing ever puts you out; I never remember seeing you in a rage in all my life, whereas I—well, a very slight cause suffices to upset my temper. Quite absurd little trifles annoy me continually; trifles that make one feel positively ashamed when one comes to think them over afterwards. I don't believe people can help themselves; it's constitutional, and just depends under what

conditions they are born. You have the good luck to own a placid mother and father—you are placid also—if not, not. Now nothing worries me more than to see things left lying about day after day, never tidied up, or put in their places. ‘We will do so and so sometime’ is a saying constantly heard, but one which always makes me angry. Sometime is no time in my estimation. Folks who are perpetually intending, but who rarely perform, delay and delay until at length, if by any chance they happen to put their purpose into execution, the day has gone by when pleasure can be derived from its fulfilment. They end by outgrowing all capacity of enjoyment, and the long deferred intention, when finally realized, becomes but Dead Sea ashes. If you wish to pluck fruit from a tree you must choose the moment when it happens to be ripe, and your appetite good. Procrastination only serves to rot the one and take the keen edge off the other. At least so it seems to me.”

“Really Kate! you have mistaken your vocation, and ought to have been a popular preacher. Then you could have harangued

against the numerous foibles of mankind to your heart's content, whereas, now, your eloquence is wasted upon me. I constitute far too humble, and numerically too insignificant an audience for a young lady of such capacious views. Why don't you become an exponent of the rights of woman? Would not such an occupation open out a field worthy your talents?"

"Certainly not; I don't approve of that sort of thing. If a woman cannot obtain what she is pleased to call her rights, by the help of soft looks, pretty ways, and feminine attractions, I very much doubt her being able to do so by stumping about the country, addressing crowded assemblies from heated platforms, and arraying her person in masculine and unbecoming garments. A woman's real strength lies elsewhere in my opinion. Besides I have remarked that the larger portion of the advocates of this system are plain old maids, and ugly married women. The pretty ones apparently find no occasion to stick up for their rights."

"Well, Kate! you relieve my mind of a

considerable burden," said Mary, playfully. "For oftentimes when you take to moralizing, I have fancied I could perceive the embryo female orator of the future. As regards your sermon on the evils of procrastination I beg to state that if your remarks were intended to point a personal moral, my conscience, on the present occasion, absolves me completely; I would even mention, with all due delicacy, that for the last five minutes, while you have been indulging in idle talk I have been pursuing the even tenor of my ways, and worked with a perseverance beyond all praise. There Miss, what say you?"

And Mary proceeded, with an almost unnecessary display of vigour, to hammer a tin tack into the wall preparatory to hanging up a sporting print, representing Mr. Jorrock's endeavouring to coax his favourite steed over a diminutive obstacle, which work of art Kate, as a sportswoman, regarded with feelings of the most intense veneration, and insisted on its occupying a prominent position.

"You're a little brick, Mary," she re-

marked, "if only for the patient manner in which you endure the floods of nonsense delivered by my unloosed tongue."

"The substantial form of Mr. Jorrocks looks beautiful," said Mary, in reply. "He exactly fills what otherwise would have been an ugly vacuum. And now to descend carefully from my exalted but not altogether secure position." Whereupon Mary cautiously placed one foot on the lower rung of the steps on which she was mounted, and returned to mother earth. "I wonder if any visitors are likely to call this afternoon," she said presently, looking out of the window in a speculative sort of way. "I ought to go and tidy myself up a bit in that case."

"I should think it doubtful," said Kate. "Anyhow we are ready for anything or anybody, from a pious ecclesiastical visitation, to a regular influx of the aborigines. By-the-bye I wonder why it is that wherever one goes, the Divines, male and female, are invariably the first to pay their respects! Is it for our sins, for our moral welfare, or for the off chance of an invitation to dinner? The problem is one I have never yet suc-

succeeded in solving to my satisfaction. It will take some little time, I daresay, before people know of our arrival, though I presume sooner or later a certain number will do us the honour of calling. The little fry first, and the big last, as is nearly always the case."

"I suppose so, and perhaps we may have more visitors than we anticipate, for I thought the agent told you Foxington was an extremely gay place during the winter months, and full of hunting gentlemen."

"Oh! so he did. But I don't much believe in agents."

"Kate, you horribly sceptical young woman. I should like to know what you do believe in? Your incredulity is something amazing, not to say preposterous."

"I believe implicitly in a little person called Miss Mary Whitbread," was the laughing rejoinder. "She at least inspires me with sentiments of profound esteem."

"And quite unworthily so. But now, Kate, if you can but be serious for two minutes together I feel perfectly certain that in a place of this sort there are sure to be any number of nice people about; people you will like."

“That depends very much on what you call nice people. They are so difficult to define, and so exceedingly few and far between. My experience leads me to believe that the majority of human beings are neither nice nor nasty, and that the utmost feeling they inspire is one of absolute indifference. They are too insipid to be loved, too vapid to be hated. I wonder where they all go to? If we were either angels or murderers by nature, heaven and hell would be perfectly intelligible, but where is the intermediate place, suitable to the enormous mass of living souls, who never rise above, or descend below the dead level of mediocrity? The mass, who are neither vicious nor virtuous, bad nor good, but who go through their lives in a commonplace monotonous fashion, performing neither any exceedingly noble actions, nor yet any very wicked ones? Is there no suitable abode for such as these? Must they either be unduly rewarded, or equally unduly relegated to eternal punishment? Oh! Mary, I cannot understand it, but my mind rebels against both these alternatives.

Justice appears so deficient in such an arrangement."

"Hush, Kate! I really wish you would not talk like that, or propound such extraordinary ideas. They are quite unfitted to your age, and only make one feel uncomfortable."

"Perhaps so. But what am I to do if such thoughts insist upon coming into my head? They are not solicited, but enter uninvited."

"You are a strange girl, Kate, and far too clever for your neighbours."

"Not at all; I am afraid it is the other way about, and they are cleverer than I. Do you know, Mary, I think now-a-days people ought to be born either fools or geniuses. The competition is so enormous, and the intermediate stage so exceedingly unpleasant. To possess aspirations without the talent necessary to lead to their fulfilment is a most fatal gift. It is like the fox and the grapes. One yearns after something, only the fox displayed superior sense by retiring when he found the clusters beyond his reach, and in persuading himself they were sour. *Our* grapes are not sour, but very sweet, if only

we could reach them, which we never can. They dangle temptingly over our heads, but are not to be grasped. Therefore I say the blind, the dumb, and the insensate are happier than a person like myself, possessing just brains sufficient to recognise the full extent of her own deficiencies, and yet not enough to supply the remedy, or win renown in any walk of life."

"Ah! Win renown in any walk of life! There speaks the bold, ambitious Brewer spirit. Kate, you ought to have been a man, like your uncle, and then you could have gone out into the world and given full vent to your energies."

"I wish I had had the luck, that's all!"

"Well as the fates were unkind enough to determine otherwise, you must content yourself at all events for the present by winning renown in the hunting field, and with that end in view, how would it be if you were to go out and interview the excellent Stirrup, who else, I fear, may feel hurt at his mistress's non-appearance?"

"Happy thought!" exclaimed Kate, with one of the sudden transitions natural to her,

descending from the abstruse study of the psychological to more terrestrial subjects. "I only took a very hurried look round the stables on our arrival, having the unpacking to see to, and so many things inside the house to set in order, but since we seem to be pretty straight I think I will profit by the suggestion. Now, therefore, to listen with becoming patience, or rather impatience, to Mr. Stirrup's long list of grievances. He is sure to be full of complaints; he always is on such occasions. Age begins to overtake the dear old man, and a move of any sort upsets his equanimity for a few days, and until he settles down. Servants, as a rule, always expect to find everything exactly the same as at home, and call out loudly over any little defects. By nature and by force of habit they are staunch Conservatives. If I were to suggest any innovation in his department I really believe Stirrup would go stark, staring mad."

So saying Kate fetched a small neat black felt hat from the peg on which it was hanging in the hall outside, stuck it jauntily on her pretty little head, put on a pair of dog-

skin gloves a few sizes too large, but which she kept for similar visits to the one she now intended paying, and after a certain amount of fumbling succeeded in extracting several large lumps of sugar from the recesses of her well-filled pocket, which preliminaries terminated she proceeded to take her departure.

"I'm off now," she exclaimed, with a pleasant nod at Mary. "Aren't you glad to get rid of me for awhile, if only for the sake of peace and quiet. Remember, however, you have my strict orders to do nothing in my absence but rest. I won't have you taking any unfair advantage over me."

With which parting words Kate vanished through the doorway and went out by the back premises, which being all on the ground floor formed a convenient means of egress.

The stables appertaining to Sport Lodge were proverbial for their excellence, the owner of the property having expended quite a small fortune first in building and then in fitting them up with the latest patents and improvements. The boxes were of such unusual size that each one was capable of being converted into two of ordinary dimensions,

while both they and the stalls, for a height of nearly five feet, were lined with finely glazed buff tiles picked out with a dull red, which reminded the spectator of some Pompeian Court rather than of a tenement in which to house equine friends. The roof and upper part of the walls were made of beautifully grained polished pine, while both drainage and ventilation were supposed to be as perfect as the hands of man could make them. Altogether, even in Foxington, where good stables were the rule rather than the exception, those of Sport Lodge were considered the show ones of the county.

Kate's entrance was the signal for various impatient neighs of welcome, while Stirrup, the stud-groom, who had been busying himself in the harness-room, immediately stepped forward to greet his young mistress with smiling alacrity. A cockney *pur sang* by birth, his features were somewhat hard and *dour*, yet they possessed that look of unmistakable honesty which never fails to win confidence.

Stirrup's hair was grizzled, and his face puckered into many a wrinkle, but the keen

eyes were as bright as ever, and the whole countenance full of shrewd common-sense. Short of stature, standing about five feet two inches in his boots, his legs possessed that peculiar curve which so frequently reveals the horsey individual. In fact, a man must have been the veriest tyro not at one glance to be able to determine the profession to which Mr. Stirrup belonged.

"Good-morning, Miss Kate," he said, advancing to meet her, and touching a respectable black billycock by way of salutation. "I'm afraid heverything 'ere be rather in a muddle for the likes of you."

"Good-morning, Stirrup," she replied with a laugh. "The '*likes* of me' is not so particular as all that, I hope. We have gone through a similar stage of discomfort in our department I can assure you. It takes some little time to settle down when one first arrives at a place. However, we shall be all right, I've no doubt, in a day or two, and I hope that, on the whole, you feel tolerably satisfied."

"*Tolerably* thankee, miss," with an emphasis on the "tolerably" which implied the

very reverse. "There be one or two little matters I should wish to make so bould has to mention. There's them air 'arness stands wants looking to just terrible. I don't know 'ow people managed afore us, but *our* 'arness wont 'ang on 'em no 'ow. Then the 'andle, it 'as dropped hoff the coach 'ouse door hof its own accord so to speak, for d'reckly I cum to turn it down it falls, which makes the door uncommon hawkud, and the bedsteads in the men's room hupstairs they be honly fit for babbies to sleep in. Why they bain't more than two feet hacross—quite ridiklous for grown-hup people, let alone such fine strapping young fellows as Dan and Tom."

"It is very distressing, certainly, Stirrup," said Kate gravely, "to think of these two muscular specimens of humanity being consigned to sleeping-places so eminently unsuitable, and as I suppose neither Dan nor Tom can alter their dimensions to fit the beds, why, we must provide beds to fit them, that's all. Is there anything else? Or do the harness stands, the coach house handle, and the men's legitimate requirements comprise the lot?"

"Certainly not, miss. I'm honly telling you of just what comes huppermost in my mind. I've not the smallest doubt but what by the hend of the day a great many hother needfuls will crop up."

"I've not the smallest doubt but what they will, Stirrup. I'm positively certain of it—at least, as certain as one can be of anything in this world."

Stirrup looked at her and shook his head.

"You allers love a joke, Miss Kate," he said, in an indulgent, semi-protesting manner. "You *must* 'ave your larf whatever 'appens. Well, well, young people are not like hold, and I wad give ten years' wages to be your hage again. I'm getting a bit stiff and rusty for shure. Ah!"—as he caught sight of one of the understrappers endeavouring to raise the handle of the pump—"that reminds me that ere machine be hawful bad to work. It took a couple on us to get the 'osses their water this forenoon, and them fine windys, too, be hall for show. Not one of 'em can be made to hopen. They be stuck quite fast, and the boiler in the wash'ouse it are wrong, not ha drop of 'ot

water to be got, and one of the gas cocks won't turn proper, so that the gas escapes, and the smell is henuff to pison the 'osses, and—"

How long Stirrup, being once launched, might have added to this fresh list of grievances it is impossible to say. Kate's patience was fairly worn out.

"That will do, that will do," she interrupted, making believe to stop her ears. "I shall never remember one half of what you have told me. Send for a man, a dozen men if needful, and get everything put straight that's not to your mind. I suppose pumps and handles, and boilers and gas cocks, can all be mended *somehow*. It's not worth bothering either *yourself* or *myself* about such trifles, Stirrup. Let's dismiss them from our mind. All places get more or less out of repair when they have stood empty for several months. I don't suppose these stables have been occupied since last winter, but apart from a few small defects, even you, Stirrup, must admit them to be very nearly perfect."

She was anxious, if possible, to coax him

into some expression of approbation, but Stirrup was equal to the occasion, and would not allow himself to be thus entrapped.

"They be well henuff in their way, miss," came the cautious reply. "I as seen better, and I as seen wus. For my part I never swears by them there tiles, they be very dazzling to osses' eyes. Such like new fangled fancies please some folks, but I am not one hoff those to run hafter every fresh craze that is started; hold fashioned ways and hold fashioned hideas be more to my mind."

"Yes, but Stirrup, it is possible to improve on them sometimes."

"People sez so, I know miss, but I don't believe 'em. What was good henuff for our forefathers his good henuff for us, and hif it aint it ought to be."

"According to that theory, Stirrup, we should never progress. We might still continue to fashion flint implements, clothe ourselves in the skins of wild animals, and dwell in rude huts in the middle of a lake as our ancestors are supposed to have done in very remote ages. No pump-handles, gas cocks

and boilers, in those days, Stirrup, nothing but marrow bones and raw meat."

"I can't hargue with you, Miss Kate. You 'ave that clever way of turning and twisting a man's words, as makes 'im feel 'is own hignorance. I never 'ad any book learning to speak hof, and my father, and 'is father h afore 'im be hall the hancestors I can hark back to. Owsomever, hif it are true folks used to live in the way you say, we may feel grateful to the Halmighty for present blessings. I wonder them there lake dwellers did not hall die of the rheumatiks. The situation must 'ave been mortal damp and unhealthy."

Which reflection appeared to afford Mr. Stirrup food for the most profound cogitation, and to reconcile him somewhat to the shortcomings of Sport Lodge. He had known Kate from her childhood, and having lived for many years in Mr. Brewser's service, was looked upon by the young lady in the light of a valued friend, entitled to speak out and promulgate his opinions as he choose, of which privilege Stirrup in course of time had come to avail himself with tolerable freedom.

Body and soul he was devoted to his young mistress, she was his beau ideal of everything attractive, lovely, and feminine. None other could compare with her in his estimation. Woman quickly recognises her worshippers and a sincere admirer, be he in the humblest walk of life, never fails to touch a weak spot in her heart or vanity. It is difficult to define whether this result arises from a natural love of flattery, an innate wish to please, or an unwholesome thirst for admiration; anyhow Kate regarded old Stirrup's faults with lenient eyes, knowing how thoroughly his zeal, honesty, and friendship, were to be relied upon, added to which qualifications he happened to be a most first rate groom, completely devoted to his horses, and never so happy as when engaged in performing those duties which their care rendered necessary. Kate's stud, as before stated, consisted at the time of her arrival of three hunters, a pair of ponies, a hack and a harness horse. First and foremost came King Olaf, who considering himself neglected during his mistress's colloquy with Stirrup, had all the time it lasted been violently pawing up the straw

with his hoofs and endeavouring to poke his soft nose between the iron bars of the box. In colour he was a bright golden chestnut streaked with white, which latter colour became more pronounced at the root of the tail, and testified to the Birdcatcher blood which ran through his veins, while a white blaze down the forehead and three white stockings on the two hind and near forelegs rendered him, quite apart from his good looks, an animal not easily forgotten when once seen. Clean thoroughbred, by that well-known sire Norseman, ere while a winner of the St. Leger and other important races, King Olaf's pedigree might defy the closest inspection. He stood about fifteen three, if anything perhaps a trifle under than over, but the deep girth, wide hips, great muscular thighs, and clean short legs, added to the beautiful compact frame, all gave evidence of an unusual degree of power. A better shaped or more symmetrical animal would be hard to find. King Olaf's forehand was simply perfect, a slender arching neck, strong yet supple, with a crest like iron, finely sloping shoulders in which the muscles stood

out like swelling balls, small pointed ears, always on the alert, a lean well set-on head, with large brown eyes, whose clear blue pupils seemed an index of the horse's character, and told both of courage and docility. The best judge in England would have found himself at a loss to pick a hole in King Olaf, and it was with natural pride that old Stirrup was wont to remark when called upon to display his favourite—

“There, I warrant he's about as good as they make 'em.”

And Stirrup was not far wrong, for King Olaf was one of those rare animals few and far between, who did not know what it was to turn his head, whose gallant heart would take him anywhere his rider wished, over, through, or under, as the case might be, resolute as a prize fighter, bold, active, flippant, yet withal gentle and kind—a horse such as with the greatest good luck it falls to one's share to own but once in a lifetime.

That Kate knew, and not only knew, but thoroughly appreciated his merits was clear at a glance. A cordial understanding existed between the pair. King Olaf treated his

mistress, that sharp young mistress whose clever tongue often made the golden youth of the period abashed and confused, quite *sans cérémonie*.

He gobbled up the sugar she tendered him, with the greediest avidity, and then began rubbing his beautiful head against her shoulder as if asking in coaxing terms for more. Upon which finding he had partaken of his share, he contented himself with calmly licking the buttons down the front of Kate's dress, an operation which could not be said to benefit those articles very highly.

"You dear old greedy thing!" exclaimed she, patting the glossy neck bent down before her, "you have had all your sugar, and I must keep the rest for Duckling and Grisette. What! another piece, just one tiny one? Oh, King Olaf! you are a sad glutton. You really are, only you ask so prettily, I can't resist."

It was quite nice to see them together. Kate talked and cooed to the horse, and he listened with an air of intelligence almost human and certainly touching.

"I suppose *he's* all right?" continued the

girl addressing Stirrup. "I hear the hounds meet somewhere pretty close to-morrow morning, and I should like awfully to go out if possible for an hour or two, just to have a look at them. I must begin to get into condition you know. It won't hurt King Olaf, will it, Stirrup? We ought to produce our swagger horse when we make our first appearance in the Shires, so as to impress the natives favourably. Don't you think so?"

"Most certainly, miss," he said emphatically, "and wot's more, I don't mind wagering a shilling to a golden sovereign there baint many osses out as can hold a candle to 'im. I've been ha groom now pretty nigh forty-five years, and h've never seen the one yet that could beat 'im. No, no, hi am not afraid of the Untingshire cracks, for hall the talk there is about 'em."

And Stirrup cast his eye over King Olaf with unmixed pride and satisfaction, glancing at Kate meanwhile in equal approval.

"Has he fed all right, Stirrup?"

"Fed? Why, lor bless you, Miss, that ere hanimal would eat 'is very 'ead off. I never seed a finer grubber in my life, he's a credit

to 'is hoats, that's what he is, and hi only wish we 'ad more of the same sort in hour stable. There's that Grysetty now" (the real name of the mare in question was Grisette, but not being an accomplished French scholar, Stirrup adopted a pronunciation of his own on the principle of phonetic spelling), "she's a poor, delicate, fanciful crittur hif you like. There baint a bit of stamina about 'er. Why she's 'ardly touched a feed of corn since she's been 'ere. I've no patience with the likes of 'er. Osses for all the world are just like people, and hif they turn up their noses hat good honest victulls when they're set hafore them, hall I can say is they aint worth their salt. Leastways, such is *my* hopinion, though *hincourse* heverybody is free to 'old 'is own. No hamount of pampering and coaxing will give some hanimals a 'ealthy, natural happetite. They seem to pick up for a day or two perhaps, but the himprovement is very illusive. Grysetty, now she's 'ad—well, I really 'ardly like to say *what* she's 'ad, mashes, beans, carrots, tonic balls, but hall to no purpose. She'll never make a good doer she won't, and if you take my hadvice,

Miss Kate, you'd get rid of 'er on the first hopportunity. She looks pretty well now, she 'as done no work, and hit is just possible some flat may take a fancy to 'er. There's lots o' these young sparks as don't know a oss from a cow."

"You would not have me take one of 'these young sparks in,' surely, Stirrup?"

Stirrup's eyes twinkled as he replied—

"I would not 'ave you take anyone hin, Miss Kate, but hall the same hif you get the chance of parting with Grysetty, you do as I say. You let 'er go. She'll stand no work, and by the hend of the season will be a regular bag of skin and bones, a discredit to hus both."

The much-abused animal in question, was in appearance not otherwise than a fine slashing mare at first sight, although a more critical examination revealed the facts of her standing very high from the knee downwards, and displaying a greyhound shaped barrel, not calculated to inspire confidence in her powers of endurance. Kate had originally bought Grisette at Tattersall's, owing to the representations of a friend who professed to

know the mare well. Having purchased her during the summer months, she had never yet had an opportunity of trying her with hounds, and Grisette's character had therefore been taken more or less upon trust. Whatever excellent qualities she might possess, that of being a "good doer," so important an item in a limited stud—was evidently not among the number. The mare turned her head away in a silent, sulky sort of fashion, when Kate going up offered her a lump of sugar.

"Don't trouble with 'er, miss," interposed Stirrup, seeing his mistress looked vexed, "she's a bit down in the mouth to-day. I gave 'er a dose of physick to see hif that would mend 'er happetite, and she be uncommon sorry for 'erself in consequence. She aint got a bit of pluck. There be some osses as never give hin whatever 'appens, but she—well she be a soft 'un and no mistake. I seldom comed hacross a softer. I hoften think, miss, as 'ow osses 'ave wonderful charakturs. They vary just has much as 'uman beings. Some be brave and lion-hearted, like King Olaf, and hothers again

is regular cowards. Look at that there Duckling for instance! Do you mean to tell me he aint got just as much hin that cunning little 'ead of 'is as arf the folks one comes hacross? I'll be bound that hif 'is brains was weighed against many hof em he'd beat 'em 'ollow. He's awful hartful that oss is."

"He knows a tiny bit too much, I suspect, Stirrup, eh? With all his good qualities he's terribly obstinate at times, and insists upon having his own way out hunting. Incommon justice, however, I am bound to state that that way is usually the right way. There is nearly always some cause for the Duckling's actions. Why, as a proof of his cleverness, only the other day when I rode him, seeing a low, inviting looking hedge, I thought I would pop over it just for fun, when, to my indignation, Master Duckling declined in the most persistent manner. Well, do you know, Stirrup, there was *wire* stretched all along the top, which I had failed to perceive, but which he had seen in the twinkling of an eye. Yes, the Duckling is a safe conveyance, and don't mean falling. We have got used to each other's little peculiarities, and I have long

since come to the conclusion that whenever any slight difference of opinion arises between us it is better to yield to his superior knowledge and defer my judgment to his."

"You bain't much wrong either, Miss Kate. They hall 'as their faults, but he 'as decidedly fewer than most hof 'em."

So saying Stirrup turned up the Duckling's clothing and gave him an affectionate smack on the hind quarters, which that animal promptly resented by whisking his tail from side to side and seizing hold of the manger between his strong teeth. Neither so handsome nor quite so well bred as King Olaf, he looked all over a game "varmint" wear and tear sort of hunter. Nor were his appearance and character at variance, for the Duckling, fortunately for his owner, was one of those invaluable creatures always to the fore, with an iron constitution, never sick or sorry, ever ready for his turn, or to replace an invalid, placid, averse to needless exertion, a voracious feeder, and sound as a bell, standing on the shortest and cleanest of legs—a horse of the good old-fashioned stamp, but rarely met with. He was now seven

years of age, and bar accidents appeared likely to carry Kate in the hunting field for twice that number more. If he had a fault it was that, unless in for a real good run, he sometimes inclined towards laziness, appearing to recognise fully the futility of any needless waste of vital power. But if hounds ran, then he would settle to his work in downright earnest, prick his ears when he came to a fence, and jump as if he loved jumping for jumping's sake, not merely as a means to an end, to be accomplished with the smallest possible amount of exertion. And if the run only lasted long enough to choke off the majority the Duckling was pretty nearly certain to show to the front, for although other horses might possess superior speed in a short scurry, but very few were endowed with his extraordinary staying qualities. Indeed, the further he travelled the better he seemed to go. Plough was indifferent to him, heavy ground he simply romped through. He went pegging along at the same steady, even pace up hill and down, and contrived to get over the land in a truly wonderful manner. Such was the Duckling.

Like many another good performer, if a slow beginner, a sure finisher, and one who, his blood once fairly roused, proved himself uncommonly hard to beat across a country—a thoroughly excellent, confidential, and sensible animal all round. Many was the good ride Kate had already enjoyed on the back of the stout, honest little beast, and although perhaps not *quite* so brilliant a performer as King Olaf, he nevertheless ran him very close in her affections. She liked each best in his turn, and never wholly succeeded in giving one a decided preference over the other—a state of things which all hunting men and women will probably regard as highly satisfactory.

Kate in the stables, with Stirrup to talk to and argue with, and every little particular connected with horseflesh to discuss minutely, was in her element. She stood by watching Stirrup hog the manes of the two smart Welsh cobs rejoicing in the names of Brandy and Soda, which she intended driving out to covert on the morrow, and assisted that gentleman by sundry remarks and pieces of advice. She was given to harmless, cheerful

prattle in Stirrup's presence. Anyhow, time passed so quickly and so pleasantly that she was astonished when a sonorous gong was sounded with discordant thumps by a male domestic, summoning her to lunch in the most imperious manner.

"How time flies to be sure!" she exclaimed. "Why it only seems a few minutes since I came here. However, I suppose I must be off now. Well then, Stirrup, let me see. I think you quite understand your orders for to-morrow? The hounds meet at a place called Doddington, about six miles from here, at ten o'clock. We must find our way out somehow. If you were to run down to the town later on I daresay you would come across people who could direct us. We will start punctually at nine, so as to have plenty of time to rectify any errors, and shall drive the pony phaeton out. One of the helpers had better ride Grisette, and lead King Olaf on to covert. I should think that would be the best arrangement."

"Certainly, miss," answered Stirrup. "But hi don't much like the hidea of your going hall halone, particular to start with, in

a new country, and heverything strange. There's the Duckling, he's fit and well, and ready to jump hout of 'is skin. It would do 'im good to go out for a 'our or so."

"Which means, Stirrup, I suppose," said Kate with a smile, "that you intend to accompany me?"

"Hif you 'ave no hobjections, miss. Hit will look more respectable for you to 'ave a hattendant just at first, hif you will pardon my plain speaking."

"Ah, Stirrup! I'm afraid they'll think me sadly unrespectable before long! However, as you say, the Duckling wants work, and it can do him no harm to go out for a bit, besides which I know you dearly love a peep at the hounds now and again. I don't suppose I shall make a very long day of it myself, but there's nothing like breaking the ice."

Whereupon Kate ran back hastily into the house, feeling she had been keeping Mary Whitbread waiting an unconscionable time for her mid-day meal.

"Humph!" ejaculated Stirrup, as he watched Kate's retreating form, and apparently gave vent in outward expression to a

train of inward reflections. "Talk of swells hindeed! Where is the pair as can show alongside 'er and King Olaf? Bless 'er dear 'art! What a clever, bright crittur she be to be sure! *She* ain't stuck hup, or full hof nimminy pimminy ways, like most females. Why she talks to a poor hold fellow like me exactly has if hi was an hegal. Lor! Hif she don't take the shine hout of some of these 'ere nob's to-morrow, why my name ain't R. W. Stirrup, that's hall."

With which soliloquy Mr. Stirrup re-entered the harness-room, and before long was vigorously engaged in applying a chamois leather to the brass mountings which Brandy and Soda were destined to sport on the morrow.

CHAPTER V.

MRS. FORRESTER belonged to the active and energetic order of beings who do not allow the grass to grow under its feet. Procrastination could not be included in the category of her shortcomings. Whenever any fresh arrivals appeared in the neighbourhood she immediately constituted it her duty to call upon them without loss of time. This mode of procedure had among the circle of her intimate friends become such an entirely understood arrangement that its various members regarded the lady in the light of a distinguished and perspicuous *avant-courier*, in whose reports, bad or good, implicit confidence might be placed, and according to which the actions of the district were determined.

An unfortunate couple, man and wife, had arrived at the Rest and be Thankful Hotel only so lately as last winter, with all the credentials conferred by youth, good looks, and a large fortune ; but when, thanks

to Mrs. Forrester's investigations, it became known that the lady's antecedents were not exactly all that could be wished, the Foxington world, in a body, declined to leave that thin strip of pasteboard which leads to acquaintanceship, and felt grateful to its pioneer for having saved it from the vexations of a false position. Perfect trust was reposed in Mrs. Forrester's decisions. Her ultimatum was generally law, and saved a deal of trouble, while the keen interest she took in aught appertaining to the affairs of others rendered her self-imposed task far from an unpleasant one. The reward came in the shape of knowing more than her neighbours, of being able to impress them with a sense of superior information, of having a finger in everybody's pie, and of finding herself in universal request. This feeling of importance flattered Mrs. Forrester's pride. She was fully alive to the value attached to her opinions, and spared neither time nor trouble in pursuit of gossip, wherewith to gratify or astound her numerous partisans.

Left a widow in middle life, and possessing

a competence which, though not large, was sufficient to enable her to live in tolerable comfort, her tastes being both frugal and simple, Mrs. Forrester, some ten or fifteen years ago, had purchased a small property at a propitious moment, when land happened to have considerably deteriorated in value. This domain, consisting of a dwelling house and a couple of hundred acres, was well situated within two miles of the town, and extremely handy for the larger portion of the meets. The land Mrs. Forrester farmed herself, and there was no better judge of stock, or more judicious buyer and seller of beasts, in the whole country round. The 'cutest grazier could not show more favourable accounts than she, or turn a larger profit in a shorter time.

She dabbled in science and chemistry, and thoroughly understood the importance of supplying bone-forming and fatty materials where scantily provided by Nature. She believed in the possibility of improving upon that great Mistress, and thereby scored over a large number of less enlightened brethren. Moreover she held the courage of her opinions,

and did not hesitate now and again to try experiments which the easy-going, half-educated farmers regarded as the height of lunacy, but which not unfrequently ended by carrying conviction to the narrow grooved agricultural mind. What between practical knowledge and energetic supervision, Mrs. Forrester was one of the fortunate few who made the cultivation of their native soil pay its working expenses. No one, having once made the lady's acquaintance, could fail to perceive that she possessed striking originality of character. In person she was spare and lean, deficient in that roundness usually incidental to the feminine form ; but although between fifty and sixty years of age she still retained traces of having been in her youth a singularly good-looking woman. All the features were good, in spite of the cheeks being bronzed and wrinkled, and the complexion dyed to a deep saffron by the combined effect of sun and wind and rain, added to which it was easy to see at a glance she gained nothing from borrowed plumes, and utterly disdained such female frivolities as smart frocks and unserviceable finery. Her

clothes fulfilled the primitive mission of covering the human body with regard to warmth and comfort rather than to effect. She wore no frills, no furbelows, no such abomination as a dress improver. False hair, false busts, false fronts, false teeth, were to her things unknown. Nevertheless, the neat head, with its covering of dark glossy hair, as yet untouched by the hand of time, the quick intelligent eye, the oval-shaped face, small mouth, and delicately arched nose, all bespoke a person of gentle birth; while neither exposure to the elements, nor utter indifference to outward appearance, had been able wholly to efface those good looks with which the Creator had at some period or other undoubtedly endowed Mrs. Forrester. The thing which startled you most was her voice. Deep in tone as that of any man, clear and sonorous, it yet possessed a brusqueness which impressed the unaccustomed listener very strangely. To all intents and purposes, it might have emanated from the deepest recesses of the ground, it sounded so sepulchral and far away. Mrs. Forrester's ordinary attire consisted of a short and

perfectly plain dark cloth petticoat, guiltless of trimming or superfluous adornment, beneath which appeared a pair of stout, broad-soled, square-toed, hob-nailed shooting boots, above which again, it was whispered, a masculine garment, that shall be nameless, was donned, but which the observant professed many a time to have seen. Anyhow, under petticoats were not patronised, as was evident enough, else why that dual suggestion conveyed to the mind? The upper portion of Mrs. Forrester's attire was composed of a loose, cut-away jacket, also made of cloth, opening over a checked flannel waistcoat, varied, on grand occasions, by a spotted bird's-eye; a white silk tie, held in its place by a silver horse-shoe pin or gold fox's head, a pair of stout dog-skin gloves, that is to say when gloves were worn at all, which was the exception rather than the rule, and a black felt pot hat, under whose brim the abundant hair was rolled away on either side the face in the good old-fashioned style, finished off at the back by a velvet bow, the only piece of finery in which Mrs. Forrester rejoiced, if finery indeed such a brown, rusty, greasy ad-

junct could be rightly considered. The whole constituted a most convenient costume, easily modified for equestrian purposes by the substitution of a riding skirt for the ordinary walking one, and of a pair of Wellingtons in place of the shooting boots. Mrs. Forrester's gait was highly characteristic, displaying a sideways roll, half-way between the heavy dragoon and the jockey. So closely, indeed, did it resemble that of the Lords of Creation, as to render it extremely difficult at a slight distance to determine unto which sex she actually belonged. In fact those who put her down as forming one of the masculine community could easily be pardoned so natural an error. Morally Mrs. Forrester possessed undoubted ability. She had great powers of observation, a keen appreciation of the ludicrous, an innate love of fun, coupled with a wonderful insight into the motives actuating mankind, which prompted her on all occasions to turn the ordinary transactions of everyday life into a joke, or at least to perceive their facetious element. Intelligent, well-informed, clever, amusing, and above all unlike the common-place herd of human

beings, no wonder Mrs. Forrester was considered excellent company, and gladly welcomed by her fellow creatures in spite of the humorous propensity which prompted her to concoct all sorts of tales at their expense. True this versatility of speech occasionally brought her into trouble, nevertheless she was so thoroughly jolly, kind-hearted, and good-natured with it all, that people forgave her little peculiarities, pocketed pride, and laughed at the exaggerated accounts of their own doings and sayings which were freely circulated throughout the county. Mrs. Forrester had earned the not unenviable reputation of being "a character," and characters are generally privileged individuals who can say and do things not allowed the rest of the world. Her father, in her youth, had kept a pack of foxhounds. Mrs. Forrester, therefore, had been brought up in a sporting coterie, and was passionately fond of hunting. Indeed, so great was her knowledge on this subject, that very shortly after settling at Foxington she acquired the maternal sobriquet of "The Mother of the Hunt," by which name she was known far

and wide. No one in the whole county, not excepting the huntsman himself, was so thoroughly conversant with the run of a fox, or the difficulties connected with his successful pursuit. Often and often it happened that when the officials were at their wits' end which way to turn, or how next to proceed, and were on the eve of abandoning the chase in despair, a quiet hint from Mrs. Forrester gave a clue to the direction in which the hunted animal had most probably effected an escape. She not only knew every hound by name, but was conversant with their respective merits. She could tell how Gaylad was the foremost in Sir Beauchamp Lenard's pack, how Garrulous ran mute, how Granite suffered from bad feet, Granby from a weakly constitution, and how Goliath could live through the longest and the most tiring day without exhibiting any symptoms of weariness. She knew them all, and loved them all, as if they had been her children, or she their kennel huntsman. In the saddle Mrs. Forrester was absolutely at home, and there were but few men, who even now, in her declining years, when she took it into her

head to ride straight, could beat the gallant old lady. They tell a story still, of how some few winters ago the whole Field came down to the celebrated Grangeton brook. It might not have measured more than about twelve to fourteen feet across, but the banks were steep and crumbling, the bottom treacherously muddy, and the water as it gurgled swiftly by looked coldly dark and forbidding. For an hour or more the assembled company had been walking after a fox, during which horses and riders had lost much of their matutinal ardour, without indulging in that excitement which often stands it in good stead, when all of a sudden the hounds splashed through the brook and picked up the scent on the opposite side with renewed zest. Heads down, sterns up, they streamed away over the big grass field of ridge and furrow. A moment's hesitation ensued, then the huntsman, closely followed by two or three of the more adventurous spirits, endeavoured to ford the stream by jumping in and clambering up the rotten bank on the other side. It was so boggy, however, and they rescued themselves with

such extreme difficulty, that upon one of their number floundering into a hole, and horse and rider disappearing bodily into the water, those pressing on from behind, after witnessing the disaster, declared the attempt to be fraught with so much danger as to render it positively unsafe, if not to themselves, at all events to their steeds. In fact the occasion was one when the risk to animal became unusually prominent. While standing deliberating on the whereabouts of the nearest bridge, and racked by that uncertainty as to whether to stake all and proceed, or to hazard nothing and retire, which every fox-hunter doubtless has experienced during his career, suddenly, and to the inexpressible astonishment of the beholders, no less a person than Mrs. Forrester was seen to resolutely take her horse by the head, cram him along in a manner not to be denied, and charge down at the bottomless gulf, which, with a few exceptions, had defeated the entire company. A moment of breathless anxiety followed as the animal reached the brink, and for a second paused in his stride; but he happened to be a particularly good

clever hunter, who thoroughly understood his work, and in less time than it takes to tell he landed on the opposite side with a bit of a scramble, owing to a portion of the bank giving way, but still without mishap. A murmur of applause ran through the ranks of the spectators. "Bravo, bravo!" they cried with one accord. And now, ashamed to be outdone by a woman, and an aged one to boot, a noble sportsman inspired with fresh courage endeavoured to follow Mrs. Forrester's example, but alas! the undermined earth once more gave way, and his horse having jumped extremely short, was precipitated into the cold ungracious element, while the aristocratic rider, after executing a neat somersault, landed on *terra firma* on the crown of his head, thereby completely annihilating a smart new Lincoln and Bennett. These catastrophes overcame the Field. Helter-skelter, men, women, and children, accompanied by a trailing hound or two, galloped off in all haste to the bridge. For the rest of that day, and for many a day to come, Mrs. Forrester's gallant feat was the theme of every tongue. To her was accorded

that admiration, and that meed of applause which courage, accompanied by success, invariably elicits.

With fine hands, a strong if not a graceful seat, and aided by all sorts of curious combinations, in the way of bits, nosebands, gags, and martingales, she could master animals, which none of her own, and but few of the sterner sex, were capable of managing. She consequently bought at a low figure, never by any chance giving long prices for her horses, and, as was generally the case, they improved under her tuition, and in the course of a few months became decently tractable, thereby enabling her to pass them on at a considerable profit, so that no one could gainsay the fact, seeing the risk and trouble incurred, that that profit was not fairly Mrs. Forrester's due, and honourably gained by her own exertions. She was on terms of the closest intimacy with every dealer, farmer, and breeder of horses in the whole country round, and by frequently introducing good customers, whose purses were oftentimes longer and more fully stocked than their heads, secured the seller's

heartly good will, which at odd times was displayed by the propitiatory gift of an ailing, vicious, or unsound quadruped, which donation the lady invariably accepted on the assumption that if the worst came to the worst lead was cheap, and that anyhow these afflicted animals formed an interesting subject on which to pursue scientific experiments not yet thoroughly tested by the Veterinary College. Now and again, thanks to her really marvellous knowledge of horseflesh and to the virtue of innumerable receipts accumulated during many years, she succeeded in effecting extraordinary cures. Then Mrs. Forrester's triumph was complete. When she had conquered some obstinate spavin, patched up a rickety back sinew, or doctored satisfactorily any long-standing complaint, through remedies peculiarly her own, she experienced a sensation of genuine pleasure. So great, indeed, was the respect in which her healing powers were held by the simple country folks that they were won't to aver Mrs. Forrester was worth all the skilled practitioners put together. It therefore was not unnatural

these gentlemen viewed so formidable a rival with envy and suspicion, declaring her to be a person of inferior experience, professing to know more than she really did. Every morning of her life regularly when the clock struck six, in the depths of winter or the height of summer, Mrs. Forrester rose from her bed and spent the hours before breakfast in going the round of the farm, inspecting the stock, examining the hedges, and cross-questioning the men; after which meal she retired into an inner sanctum, a sort of half laboratory, half carpenter's shop, on whose shelves were carefully stowed away the lotions, draughts, and cunning compounds wherewith she sustained her reputation. On non-hunting days she employed herself by nailing, hammering, planing, sawing, mending, and manufacturing the various articles in use on the premises. Sometimes she appeared for a day or two with her arm in a sling, or fingers bandaged up, due to some such untimely accident as the slip of a chisel, the shutting of a knife, or splintering of a bit of wood. In a virgin country where man must depend upon his own exertions to

supply his daily wants, such a woman as Mrs. Forrester would have been regarded as a valuable auxiliary, a helpmate who could turn her hand to anything; but among an enervated, over-civilized population, her accomplishments often failed to be appreciated at their full value, calling forth ridicule rather than respect, while the verdict of the public was "A clever but peculiar old woman, who ought to have been a man." Public opinion, however, did not disturb the even tenor of her ways. She was made of too strong metal to be wafted backwards and forwards like a feather by every puff of wind. She had her own ideas, and stuck to them, through thick or thin, when she considered herself in the right.

On the afternoon of the day next to that of Kate Brewser's arrival at Sport Lodge, Mrs. Forrester determined on a reconnaissance in force. She therefore ordered out her dogcart, into which was harnessed an antiquated hunter who rejoiced in the somewhat singular name of Resurrection. He had been snatched from the very jaws of death by his present mistress, who during an

obstinate and well-nigh fatal attack of tetanus had treated him with frequent injections into the veins of nitrate of amyll, and thus christened the patient in memory of the event. Mrs. Forrester mounted on to the box seat, took the reins in her hand, gave the whip a playful flourish, and started, with the intention of calling upon Miss Brewer before anyone else had done so, in order to be able to report as usual. Ready as she invariably was to make new acquaintances, the two girls by their youth and isolated position, inspired her with more than a customary interest, rendering her intent on forming an opinion as to their merits as quickly as possible. She drove steadily along until she came to Foxington town, where she encountered her particular friend Mr. McGrath, who not yet entirely recovered from the effects of the pigskin, had declined to rise at the preposterously early hour of half-past six o'clock in order to jog close upon sixteen miles to covert, and was therefore wiling away the afternoon by strolling gently up and down the High Street, flattening his nose disconsolately against the shop

windows, and smiling fraternally at every decent-looking young woman he happened to run against in the course of his peregrinations. Mrs. Forrester's arrival was a perfect godsend to the idle, ennuyéd Hibernian. He made such frantic gestures that in an instant she, nothing loth, brought the vehicle to a standstill.

"Hulloa!" she said in her friendly unceremonious fashion. "What are you doing here all by yourself, like a lost sheep? Where are the others? Gone hunting?" as Mr. McGrath nodded assent. "Pray why did you not go too? Nothing amiss with the stud I hope? It's too early in the day to begin with invalids."

"No, no, the stud is right enough," answered Mr. McGrath, with a shake of the head. "Faith but I wish the master could say the same. He's very bad."

"Bad? Why what's the matter, man? You look in the rudest of health."

"Ah! Looks are deceptive. It always *was* my fate to appear best when I suffered most. I'm in great pain I can assure you."

"I'm sorry to hear it. But why so mysterious? What is this malady from which you are suffering thus terribly? I declare you have roused my curiosity."

"An injured, abraded and inflamed cuticle," replied Mr. McGrath with perfect gravity, "which, however slight it may sound, renders horse exercise an extremely unpleasant mode of locomotion. Now don't laugh. 'Pon my life it's no laughing matter," he added somewhat querulously, as the lady's sides shook with mirth.

"You're exactly like all men," she said, looking at him in friendly contempt. "When the least thing goes wrong, you've no more pluck than a barn fowl. A prick of a pin is enough to make you think you're going to die. Men are so awfully frightened about their precious selves. They haven't half the courage of we women."

"Don't kick a poor fellow when he's down, there's a dear good soul. I came to you to be cheered, not to be lectured on the shortcomings of my sex. Gad! but if it's your own superiority you wish to prove by the argument, I am willing to admit it.

There ain't many people in this world like Mrs. Forrester."

"You are incorrigible, Terry," she said with a conciliatory smile. "But come now, since you say you are suffering such agonies, allow me to propose a remedy. Have you ever tried a mixture of vinegar and glycerine in cases of a similarly distressing nature? Three parts vinegar to one of glycerine? It's a receipt of my own, and a most efficacious one, only you must not mind if it smarts a bit at the first application. You must endeavour to bear the pain heroically. I constantly use the mixture in cases of cuts and sprains among the gees, and find it very successful."

"Thanks. I promise to try the prescription this evening, and shall hope to derive such benefit from its use as to enable me to turn out to-morrow with the Critchley at Doddington. I see they don't muster until ten o'clock, which thank goodness is a slightly more reasonable hour. These early meets are positively deadly, and play the bear with my delicate constitution."

"*Your* delicate constitution suffers from

late nights, big cheroots, and black bottles, my friend, not from early rising. I declare I've no patience with you young men. You begin by setting the fundamental laws of nature at defiance, burning the candle at both ends, expending the vital forces, without supplying any fuel to the furnace, and then you wonder that the fire is feeble, and abuse your constitutions. Just as if they were to blame indeed! If you were only taught a few scientific truths in your youth, and the most elementary principles of physiology, you would know very differently, and learn that nine times out of ten you have only yourselves to thank for your ailments. Abjure smoke and turn teetotalers, and your health would soon improve. Give up nipping sherry at all hours of the day, whether you require it or not, simply through the force of habit and weak indulgence."

"You are in a very severe mood, Mrs. Forrester. I withdraw my luckless remark."

"No need to do that. And what's more a few home truths do you men a lot of good now and again. Things are made far too pleasant for you in these days."

"Mrs. Forrester, I wonder whether you would condescend to answer a question that has troubled my mind for long?" asked Terry somewhat irrelevantly.

"That depends entirely on what it is. I make no rash promises."

"Well, since you entertain so profound a contempt for my unfortunate sex, how did you ever bring yourself to commit matrimony?"

"Because my sentiments have grown with age and experience, and because being a woman, in my youth I possessed a woman's foibles, and was not proof against the voice of the charmer. Because," and her voice trembled ever so slightly, "I was not happy at home, and I liked Colonel Forrester better than I did anyone else. My mother struck me once in a fit of passion, and he took my part. I felt grateful to him, and when he asked me to be his wife I gave my consent. Now," with a change from grave to gay, "now, Mr. Curious, you know all about it, and I hope you feel satisfied."

"Forgive me, Mrs. Forrester," he said, "if I have done anything to recall unpleasant memories."

Somehow he felt sorry for having asked the question.

"Terry," she replied, bending forward and laying her hand on his shoulder, while a kindly expression swept across her weather-beaten face, "I daresay there are episodes in the lives of most of us which we do not care to dwell upon, and an old sore is hard to heal. You are a goodhearted creature, and would never wound anyone intentionally. If I had had children of my own, if I had been a happy woman, I might have been very different. Do not let us talk of it. And now I really must be getting on, or the chances are I shall have had my journey for nothing, and find my young lady out."

"Your young lady? Pray who do you intend honouring with a call?"

"I gave you credit for more discernment. Why slow pate! Miss Brewser of course. Where else do you suppose? That reminds me, did you ever give that gay friend of yours my message, or did you forget it altogether?"

"No, not I. I not only delivered it in full, but embellished it by various little additions

of my own. There's nothing like serving things up spicy when you are about it. A little exaggeration does no harm."

"Well!" ejaculated the lady, forgetting her hurry, and administering a soothing tap to Resurrection with the butt end of the whip. "This is interesting. What did the great Colonel say to our plan? Did he seem to cotton to it at all?"

"I hardly know. Jack's a rum chap in some ways. He takes ideas of honour and so forth into his head every now and then, and one might just as well talk to a pig as to try and dislodge them. You can't get at him either when he's in a mood of this sort, for he declines to give out his opinions. Faith, but we had real sport last night. Fuller did the gentleman; offered Jack first innings, and refused to spoil the market, just as if he had a chance against Jack indeed! However, nothing would satisfy him until he succeeded in getting up a bet on the subject. You know his mania for gambling in every shape or form."

"But about this bet, Terry. What sort of bet did he make?" said Mrs. Forrester,

pricking up her ears at the prospect of a bit of gossip. "Who did he bet with?"

"Why, with Jack. To tell the truth, the latter seemed so bored and annoyed altogether by the conversation, and our recommendations he should marry the heiress, that I verily believe he hardly knew the nature of the wager, but Fuller booked it fast enough. Ten to one on the Honourable; it's down in black and white."

"Well, I wish Jack success, I am sure. Ready money is sadly needed in that quarter, and an infusion of wealth into the family would be cordially welcomed."

"Yes. He went and lost a lot to that beggar Fuller only last night, worse luck."

"You don't say so? I should have thought after all that has come and gone he would have had a little more sense. Well, we must try and precipitate matters if we can. I tell you what, Terry," in a confidential whisper. "You and I will bring the young couple together and give them a helping hand. Friends are often very useful on these occasions. Jack is a real nice fellow with all his faults, and I know no one

I would sooner do a good turn to. I'll go this minute and see what can be done to pave the way. Ta-ta, Terry. Hope to find you out to-morrow with a renovated epidermis. Don't forget, three parts vinegar to one of glycerine."

"Shan't I see you again before then?" he asked wistfully, thinking how very hard it would be to kill time in the absence of his companions when left to his own devices. "You won't spend *all* the afternoon with Miss Kilmansegg, surely?"

"Meaning to say I had better devote a portion of it to Mr. Terence McGrath, eh? Well, if you feel sufficiently active to step out to my place about tea time, you shall be treated to a cup of that comparatively harmless beverage, and hear my report in full. There, is your discontent appeased?"

"Entoïrely. I feel now I have something to live for—something to look forward to."

"So much the better," came the rejoinder. "It's a thousand pities you do not cultivate some legitimate ambition in life instead of wasting your abilities and frittering your

days away. There's good stuff in you, Terry, only circumstances have done their best to spoil it. *Au revoir.*"

With which parting salutation Mrs. Forrester once more coaxed the docile Resurrection into a trot, and without any further interruption to her progress proceeded to Sport Lodge, up the drive of which domain she drove in her handsomest style. To ring the bell and inquire if Miss Brewser were within was but the work of a second. It was, however, with no small satisfaction she found the interrogation answered in the affirmative. So leaving Resurrection in charge of the small boy who officiated as carriage groom, and herself taking care to adjust a large rug over the animal's attenuated quarters, she entered the house, and was promptly ushered into the drawing-room.

Mrs. Forrester's eye was more accustomed to horseflesh and cattle than to elegant furniture ; nevertheless even she perceived a considerable improvement had been effected since Mr. Reginald Rich's tenancy. Only a few seconds, however,

were accorded her in which to make observations, for Kate almost immediately appeared, and advancing with both hands outstretched, and every sign of the liveliest pleasure, said—

“This is indeed good of you, Mrs. Forrester, to come and see me so soon. Of course I can be but the veriest stranger, but allow me to assure you that you are by no means one to me. I know you quite well from repute, and have so often read of your doings in the *Field* and sporting papers that I feel as if we were already acquainted. And to think that you are the first person to honour me with a call! I am immensely flattered and proud!”

Now Mrs. Forrester, free as she was from feminine vanity, had still her weak spots, and the artless and evidently sincere flattery of Kate's introductory speech flew straight to one of them. Had she been told she possessed good eyes, a pretty foot, or a becoming headgear, she would have laughed the idea to scorn, and it would have made no more impression upon her than upon a dried-up old piece of shoe leather; but to be told

that she was a celebrity, that outside people knew of her exploits in the hunting field, and admired and respected her, was a different thing altogether.

She looked into Kate's fresh, honest, smiling face, and said to herself—

“Humph ! You'll do ; you're a nice sort of girl—not one of the stuck up, airified creatures I abominate.”

She did not give outward expression to the thought, being far removed from the army of gushers, but answered instead, in a remarkably gracious manner—

“You make me blush, Miss Brewser,” though such an occurrence was a distinct impossibility, “and it is my turn to feel flattered by so kind a reception. My renown, if renown indeed I have, is but of a very humble order. Many people turn in disgust from a horsey old woman, considering her an unnatural object, a sort of monstrosity, a standing reproach to their class. However, I am pleased to see you are not likely to join these harsh critics, and view a sporting female with greater leniency. What is bred in the bone and born in the flesh

defies even Mrs. Grundy—at least, so say I. I come of a hunting family, and have inherited its failings if not its virtues. For generations past the Whittakers have been devoted to horses. My great grandfather, old Bob Whittaker as he was called on the turf, owned the celebrated Casta Diva, who in her day won more races than any animal in training. He ran through nearly every shilling he could raise, and bequeathed to posterity a legacy of debt, which has harassed it ever since. So much for one's ancestors !”

“No wonder you have inherited their sporting tendencies,” said Kate. “In process of time they have doubtless become completely hereditary, like the six-fingered men and women we read of in scientific books.”

“Ah ! I see you are a bit of a philosopher, Miss Brewser.”

“I'm afraid not,” answered Kate with modest disclaimer, though she nevertheless felt flattered by the suggestion. “Philosophers, as a rule, are people who have fought the hardest of all battles, and have conquered self. They, therefore, can afford to

take a calm, dispassionate view of life. I regret to say I have not yet arrived at so desirable a consummation. At present my philosophy is decidedly erratic."

"Never mind what it is," said Mrs. Forrester approvingly. "I see you have got plenty of sense in your head. You and I will be good friends, I predict. You hunt, of course?"

"Yes, in a feeble, inexperienced sort of way. I feel quite bashful in coming to the shires."

"Ah! no matter. You will be one of us—one of our innermost circle so to speak."

"That, I fear, is an honour to which I am scarcely qualified to aspire," returned Kate politely. "You see, I am really new to the work, having only hunted regularly for two seasons, and that in the unfashionable provinces, but I have ridden all my life, and always loved horses and everything connected with them, and do not despair of improving, especially if so good an authority as yourself will be kind enough to give me a few occasional hints whenever I do anything extra stupid."

"I don't expect you'll require much teaching. I always find people who are fond of horses take naturally to the pursuit of the fox. However, I will bear your request in mind, and as you are evidently one of those who mean what they say, will tender advice if likely to prove useful."

"You are very kind, for I know how impossible it would be to find a better or more competent preceptress. And now, having settled that knotty point, tell me something of the people we are likely to meet in this neighbourhood, so that I may not appear an absolute ignoramus. Are they *very* formidable?"

"You must judge for yourself. It depends a good deal upon whether you are easily frightened. I may as well tell you, however, that as a rule the folks here are not particularly sociable, especially towards strangers. Most of them fancy themselves a good deal, and think it confers distinction to be extremely exclusive. Our big wigs, the Earl and Countess of Huntingshire, are of a totally different order. People who are somebodies have nearly always pleasant

manners. It's only the small fry who consider airs and graces *comme il faut*. Our magnates generally go abroad about this season of the year on account of her ladyship's health. She is very delicate—suffers from a pulmonary complaint. This winter, however, I am told they intend remaining if possible. If they do so, you will probably meet the only daughter, Lady Anne Birkett, a nice unaffected sort of girl, and a universal favourite. She is passionately fond of hunting, but possesses nothing but one old screw, and does not therefore get out very often, unless her brother, Lord Charles, is at the Castle, when he mounts her occasionally. He has one or two tidy animals, but poor Lady Anne's quadruped is decidedly of the tumble-down order. I can't think why the Earl does not buy her a better one, though they say his Irish rents have not been coming in lately, and he is desperately hard up. After the Huntingshires come the Stapletons of Stapleton Hall. They give out that they are descended in direct male line from the Stapleton who came over to England at the time of the Conquest, and in consequence

seem to fancy themselves higher and greater than all the rest of the world. Just as if God's creatures were not alike, and had not each two eyes, a nose, and a mouth! It's such rubbish, when the only trouble they have taken is that of being born into the world with a golden spoon in their aristocratic mouths. Mr. Stapleton comes out hunting occasionally, mounted on the most splendid three and four hundred guinea horses, but never goes a yard, or jumps a single thing, however small. He says that his heart is affected, and the doctor forbids any violent exercise. I fancy the excuse is a very welcome one, and that the organ is affected more by fear than by any other malady. It is not in *the right place*. Possibly this high and mighty couple may condescend to call upon you, my dear, but don't allow yourself to feel disappointed if they do not. The favour has been denied to a good many, and is generally reserved for the fortunate possessors of titles or large fortunes. About once a year they ask some few of us to a duty dinner, which we attend from pure motives of curiosity. On other occa-

sions we remain uninvited, for the Stapleton's, male and female, are renowned for thoroughly understanding the mutton-chop-for-the-beefsteak style of entertainment."

"What is that?" said Kate, with amused interest.

"Have you never heard of it, my dear? Well, after all it is only another name for the *quid pro quo* principle so thoroughly in vogue in modern society; that elementary law of exchange and barter, which even the savages of Southern Africa appreciate, and which seems inherent in the genus *homo*. What I give I expect to receive, what I receive I expect I shall *have* to give. A perfect system of reciprocity well calculated to annihilate all real generosity or kindness of heart. Do you not understand this simple rule?"

"I call it a *disgusting theory*," replied Kate warmly. "One that does away with our faith in human nature, and teaches the impossibility of caring for our fellow creatures, for what they *are*, instead of for what they have *got*. I *hate* such worldliness and despise it thoroughly."

"So you may, so may I, but all the same

it's human nature. Half society is composed of mean, grovelling parasites, who prey upon the other portion. How can you expect such creatures to *give* anything, unless they get *back* in return? They are always trying to crawl higher and higher out of their proper sphere. Those whom they *might* be friendly with they profess to despise, and those whom they *would* be friendly with despise *them*. Such are the Stapletons; people of whom I would rather not express an opinion. But," she added, suddenly remembering it might be unwise to run down her neighbours to a comparative stranger, even though that stranger were apparently a kindred spirit, "I ought not to influence your opinions beforehand. You will probably form them fast enough for yourself."

"I have done that already," said Kate, "and feel far from prepossessed by your account. Are there any nice people besides the Stapletons about—people without blue blood in their veins, and not descended from William the Conqueror? I am democratic in my tastes, and scarcely lay sufficient store

on ancient pedigrees, particularly when unaccompanied by pleasant manners."

"Let me see. There are the Pringles, of Pringle Abbey, good, mild, humdrum folks, who exist instead of living. There is a mighty difference between the two. One consists of passive amusements, passive likes and dislikes, the other of keen sensations moral and physical. Mr. Pringle pursues the fox in a sleepy, half-hearted fashion, and Mrs. Pringle's time, poor soul, is completely occupied with the cares of maternity, and attending to her annually increasing family. Then we have the Smithsons, at Scalley. He is a pleasant kind of man in his way, a great astronomer, and very much taken up over the stars and planetary system—can talk of nothing else in fact, but his wife rides, and indeed goes very fairly well to hounds."

"Have you many good lady riders?" asked Kate with extremely natural curiosity. "Many besides yourself I mean?"

"Dear me, yes. We are overburdened with women. Not ones," thinking the speech might be taken in an uncomplimentary sense,

“who can ride, but ones who know nothing about it. Last year we had a professional beauty. Somebody asked her if she could hunt? ‘Hunt? oh, dear, yes. Extremely fond of it!’ Well, Captain Fuller, for he was the offender, mounted her on his best horse, with strict injunctions to follow him. The lady appeared exquisitely got up, little golden curls peeping out from beneath her hat, pearl brooch, diamond earrings, jewelled whip, and half a packet of violet powder upon her fair face. Everyone was on the *qui vive* to see the famous Mrs. X’s performances. Well, my dear, the very first jump settled her. It was quite a little place, but too big for the beauty, who flew from the saddle, and executed a remarkably neat voluntary under the very eyes of the field. Alas! however, the bodice happened to be tight, the lady plump, and buttons rolled in every direction. A dozen men rushed to the fair one’s assistance, who on her return to town spread wonderful reports of her own prowess in the hunting field. This is only a specimen of a portion of those who come out. Of course we have some ladies who go really

well, and show a lot of the men the way. There's a Miss Palliser for instance, who rides uncommonly hard, though you could not wish to see an uglier, more ungraceful seat on horseback. She sits perfectly sideways, and when she trots appears at every step to bow in the most obliging manner to the animal's head, but her pluck is undeniable. She bustles and shoves at the gates, cuts in, and jumps upon people at the fences, so that she is far from popular; nevertheless, in every good run she is always to the fore. The young men make rather forcible remarks, but there! very few of them care to see a woman's skirt fluttering in the distance. It conveys an uncomfortable suggestion of inferiority not to say cowardice. Then we have Mrs. Paget and Lady Beckley, Lady Anne Birkett, and Mrs. Phipps, wife of the Foxington dealer; altogether, not more than half a dozen who really follow hounds. You see ours is a good big country for a lady to get over."

"I suppose so. It certainly looked formidable enough coming along even in the train, that safest and easiest of hunters, which as a

rule reduces all obstacles to a mere nothing, and inspires contempt for five-barred gates themselves. I must confess, however, a good many of the ditches struck me as being uncommonly wide."

"They take a bit of doing certainly, but it is wonderful how soon the horses get accustomed to them. They don't as a rule drop their hind legs more often than they can help. The great thing here where you have a fair take off, out of grass into grass, is not to be afraid to go a good pace at your fences. There is pretty sure to be a ditch either on one side or the other, often a big one into the bargain. Strangers as a rule, when they make their *début* in the shires are apt to ride too slowly, and in consequence are not long before embracing mother earth. I remember Jack Hinton when he first appeared; he had been used to a banking country, and could not understand going fast at all. Well, he took five falls one after another in no time, after which he began to look upon our Huntingshire obstacles with a little more respect, and admitted they required some negotiation. You asked me for my advice just now, Miss

Brewser, so I give it. Whatever other mistakes you may commit, always remember to go a good pace at your fences, the best horse alive can't clear width without the necessary impetus."

"Thanks very much for the hint," said Kate gratefully, "and I will endeavour to bear it in mind. Two of my horses inspire me with entire confidence, but the third is quite untried. However, no doubt I shall find out her capabilities before long. What I fear most is my total ignorance of the country even to finding my way about. I wonder whether any very—*very*—VERY good-natured individual might be induced to take compassion upon an unprotected female, and constitute himself her pilot for a few days, just till the novelty wears off, and she is able to get on alone? I begin to feel quite nervous."

"You needn't. You will find plenty of candidates ready to apply for the vacant situation, and the principal difficulty may probably consist in making a judicious choice. Oddly enough when a woman elects to follow any particular man, he is always pleased, and seems

to think her doing so sheds a sort of reflected glory upon *himself*. He accepts the risk of being jumped upon with equanimity, for the sake of the distinction. Besides, the pilotee can always see what *he* is doing, how hard *he* rides, how well *he* goes. Men are curiously simple at times, and their vanity quite childishly transparent. Eve has earned an evil reputation, but she was not the only transgressor. Had the voice of the serpent been tuned in tones of subtle flattery, and Adam had had the bad luck to be the first listener, why—he would have yielded as easily as his helpmate. However, to return to our subject, if you want to go real downright hard, and are sure of your horses, you can't possibly do better than follow Colonel Clinker. No one in these parts is a patch to him. Captain Fuller too, though not so brilliant, is a good steady man with hounds, who knows what he is about, and who never takes more out of his gees than is necessary. On the whole, I would reckon him a safer escort for a lady. He is always well in front, and the Colonel is sometimes a trifle over-daring. The three brothers John-

son also are reliable pilots, and sure to turn up at the end of every gallop. On the other hand, if you just want to ride about and coffee-house, and like many young ladies consider the hunting field a fine arena for flirtation, you cannot do better than stick to Mr. McGrath. He has lots to say for himself, and is a most amusing companion."

"I don't *want* an amusing companion," answered Kate, feeling as if Mrs. Forrester had somewhat underrated her powers of equitation. "And I despise people who go out hunting in order to flirt. It's ridiculous to begin with, and wholly unsuitable to the occasion. Such eccentricities of conduct are better indulged in in private, and not under the critical gaze of some one or two hundred horsemen and women. My ambition soars higher, even indeed to endeavouring to follow this Colonel Clinker of whom you speak, although probably at a respectful distance."

"Bravo! and doubtless you may succeed, in spite of many ere now, having failed. The ladies, I must tell you, are all fond of Jack. He's a sad dog in his way."

"Do you mean that he is nice?"

"Well most people think so, but you had better judge for yourself. I almost wonder, Miss Brewser, that you have never made Colonel Clinker's acquaintance, at some of the numerous race meetings. He's about the best gentleman jock of the day."

"You don't mean to say he is the *celebrated* Colonel Clinker," exclaimed Kate, vivaciously. She felt greatly impressed by the fact, for during the perusal of those sporting papers which formed part of her daily literature, she had constantly read of this accomplished gentleman's successes, and was prepared to esteem and admire him accordingly. "I had no idea of that."

"Ah, I thought it strange his name seemed to awaken no answering chord. But my dear young lady, if you are still bent on following the Honble. Jack out hunting, allow me to whisper one word of caution."

"What is it?" said Kate, thinking Mrs. Forrester's warning would probably prove a recommendation not to be too fool hardy, or adventurous.

"Oh! nothing," replied the artful old lady, "at least nothing very particular, only

don't you go and be falling in love with him, that's all. Jack's a terribly fascinating fellow, good looking, pleasant, well bred—just the sort of man girls take a fancy to, but he can't afford to marry, more's the pity.”

“Really Mrs. Forrester, I am exceedingly obliged to you, but the state of Colonel Clinker's finances is not likely to affect me in the slightest. I am not at all matrimonially inclined, neither am I in the habit of losing my heart so easily to every chance individual I happen to come across.”

“I did not for an instant intend to convey so erroneous an idea to your mind, but you know what young men are, and I thought it only fair to give a quiet hint, taking the circumstances into consideration.”

“Thank you, but I am not aware that they demand any particular circumspection; impecunious gentlemen are common enough. I suppose there are no unusual features in the present case?”

“Not exactly, but when a certain lady becomes the subject of a bet amongst men, it is only fitting and proper that that lady,

especially if she be a stranger, should be informed of the occurrence."

"And do you mean to declare men have been betting about ME?" asked Kate, with flashing eyes. "Has *my name* been bandied about already?"

"Don't be vexed, my dear," said Mrs. Forrester, soothingly, beginning to feel a little alarmed at the commotion which she herself had raised. "Very likely the whole thing was intended as a joke. Very likely my informant may have been wrong. The affair came to my ears quite casually."

"I call it odious, horrible, and unmanly of them," continued Kate angrily.

"It is not nice, certainly," murmured the other, sympathetically, for she always made it a rule to go with the stream.

"Nice? I should think it wasn't indeed. People in these parts seem to have funny manners."

"I don't suppose they are worse than they are anywhere else," replied Mrs. Forrester sedately, considering it incumbent upon her to defend the absent.

"Perhaps you will be good enough to in-

form me of the exact nature of this *precious* bet," said Kate, with increasing dignity. "I object to semi-confidences. They go too far in one way, and not far enough in another."

Mrs. Forrester began to think that this seemingly pleasant young lady might, under certain conditions, prove more formidable than she had anticipated. She therefore opined the moment had arrived to try the effect of more conciliatory overtures.

"Tell me what has been said?" demanded Kate, sternly.

"My dear, you take this matter too seriously altogether. No importance should be attached to such a trifle. Even if Captain Fuller *did* bet ten to one that Jack Clinker would propose and be accepted, you surely can afford to smile at so foolish a wager. No one can *make* you marry a man against your will."

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Kate, fervently; then setting her white teeth with a vicious expression, she added—"According to my present way of thinking, *nothing* shall ever induce me to marry at *all*."

"Ah! You will change that opinion some of these days."

"I know I never *shall*."

"Then it is needless for me to warn you against the fascinations of my friend Jack. Needless to tell you what a desperate flirt he is."

"Quite needless. *Your friend Jack*," placing a marked emphasis on the words, "is nothing to me nor I to him. All I desire is that we may remain complete strangers one to the other. Any wish on my part to make his acquaintance has completely disappeared. I ignorantly fancied him a sort of hero, a veritable 'admirable Crichton,' but my ideas have undergone a most complete transformation."

"And yet I assure you no better fellow lives on the face of this earth."

"In which case I prefer less immaculate beings. They are more to my mind."

"Upon my word, you carry resentment too far. It's ridiculous that you and he should be at loggerheads, all about nothing-too."

"That depends on what you *call* nothing. I *call* Colonel Clinker's offence a most serious one, and one which few women in my position

would forgive. Why should he want to bet about my marrying him? Simply because he fancies me to be rich, and because—as you yourself admitted just now, he is out at elbows. Do you call *that* gentlemanly conduct pray?”

“Poor Jack! you have evidently taken him *en horreur*, as the French put it, and nothing I can say or do will suffice to convince you of his good qualities. Perhaps some of these days you may find cause to alter your opinions, and to view what at most can only be regarded in the light of a slight and natural indiscretion, with greater indulgence.”

Kate felt aggravated by the above remarks.

“Perhaps,” she echoed scornfully. “Mutability is the law of nature, and the prerogative of women; still we shall see. I doubt your prediction ever coming true.”

“One would not think every winter, when the trees to all intents and purposes are dead, that they will blossom once more into life, sending forth vigorous young shoots, and yet they do. It strikes me, Miss Brewser,” fixing a keen enquiring glance upon the girl,

“that your heart is not unlike the trees, *i.e.* enjoying a wintry sleep, from which it will awaken sooner or later. I am an old woman, and have studied the frailties of my sex.”

“Nevertheless, Mrs. Forrester, for once your deductions are wrong. My heart is enjoying *no* wintry sleep, but simply reposes in its normal condition. But come, we are degenerating into nonsense.”

“A signal for me to be going,” replied Mrs. Forrester, looking at her watch, “particularly as I have an appointment with Mr. Phipps the dealer, on my way back through the town. I hope, my dear, we part amicably, and that you will not bear malice for what I almost fear has proved an officious and apparently an unwelcome action on my part. At least give me credit for good intentions, and believe I meant but kindly. And if—” hesitating ever so slightly, “you would be good enough to keep the subject under discussion an entire secret, it will confer a great obligation.”

Kate Brewer drew herself up to her full height, and cast a bold steady glance upon her companion. “Mrs. Forrester,” she said

proudly, "I am not in the habit of repeating confidences or retailing gossip. You need fear nothing from me; besides, I am not likely to circulate a story so galling to my pride."

Mrs. Forrester brightened considerably at this speech, although not perhaps for the first time in her life she felt as if she had received a severe snubbing. She had dabbled in muddy waters, and stirred them to their very depths, and to tell truth, was the least little bit afraid of her own handiwork. It was a relief to think she could trust Kate, and that the girl was not likely to bring her into trouble. She began to respect her new acquaintance. Evidently she had more in her than she had given her credit for, and was very far removed from the ordinary run of young ladies she was in the habit of encountering.

"After all," she said, trying the effect of conciliatory diplomacy. "After all nothing is easier in this world than to avoid people one dislikes. Colonel Clinker need never trouble you much," upon which Mrs. Forrester rose from her seat, thinking it better to let

well alone, and shook Kate by the hand with every appearance of cordiality.

“Good-bye, my dear,” she said, “I shall come and see you again before long. You and I will be good friends I predict, in spite of our unfortunate little discussion.”

“Don’t blame yourself in any way, Mrs. Forrester. On the contrary I feel very grateful to you for your communication. I might have jumped down this gentleman’s throat in my foolish admiration for his powers of equitation, and now—why now—forewarned is forearmed.”

“That’s all right,” responded the other cheerfully. “All’s well that ends well, and I should hate to make mischief between my fellow creatures.” With which benevolent and highly laudable sentiment she effected an escape while the moment appeared propitious.

For five whole minutes did Resurrection pursue the even tenor of his ways undisturbed. His mistress seemed preoccupied, her brow clouded by obtuse thought. Gradually, however, it cleared. Mrs. Forrester was herself again, and the whip des-

ended with a sharp flick of reprimand on the quadruped's lean sides in reproof for his previous neglect of duty.

"Yes, of course!" said the lady half aloud, speaking like one who had successfully severed a Gordian knot. "Everything is certain to come right. The great secret of overcoming the feminine heart is to inspire it with interest. Love, pity, hatred, contempt, no matter what the sentiment, so long as it be not indifference. Now after I am gone this Miss Brewster will sit down and go over every word I have said. She'll begin by detesting Jack with all her might, and fly out at the mere recollection of him, but in a little while she'll cool down, and then she'll set to work and wonder what he's like, whether he's really such a bad lot, why he takes so kindly to flirtation, what the ladies see in him, and so forth. He will engage her thoughts if nothing else, and that's half the battle. Pique and wounded pride can be trusted to do the rest. Some horses must be driven by the law of contrary, and some women are exactly the same. Ask them to do a thing and they refuse, ask them *not* to

do it and it is done directly. If Miss Brewster is warned not to fall in love with Colonel Clinker, I bet she's head over ears in no time. Ha, ha, ha! Jack, my boy! I promised Terry to do you a good turn when I could, and I flatter myself I have advanced your cause not a little. To-day's work has set the ball rolling in earnest."

Which might be true enough; but whether Mrs. Forrester was justified in all her surmises seems open to question. She herself, however, was supremely satisfied at the delicate and discriminating manner with which she considered affairs had been conducted. She had recovered from the effects of Kate's sarcasms and possessed a sanguine disposition.

Meanwhile Mr. McGrath was ensconced in Mrs. Forrester's drawing-room, studying Youatt on the horse, and impatiently awaiting the lady's arrival. The sound of carriage wheels produced a thrill of welcome expectation.

"Well," he exclaimed interrogatively, advancing to meet Mrs. Forrester at the front door, "What's she like?"

"She'll do," came the decided reply. "Quite a good sort, but rather high mettled, wants riding on the snaffle, with a running martingale. The least touch of the curb makes her chuck her head about like an unbroken colt. She's spirited, but very light in the mouth, and requires delicate handling. All the same she's a good 'un."

From which refined remarks Mr. McGrath gathered Mrs. Forrester was unusually impressed in Miss Brewster's favour.

"Humph! She's a high stepper is she? Proud, I suppose, and stuck up?"

"Not the least. She's very unaffected, but I fancy has a bit of a temper. However, she has got plenty of brains as well, and I would not give the snuff of a candle for a woman who does not possess the two combined."

"I prefer the brains without the temper."

"You don't know what your talking about. You require the one to sweeten the other, certainly; but the dish loses piquancy if too uniformly seasoned."

And then the two friends retired to the drawing-room, where over a cup of strong

Souchong they discussed the results of the visit in all its bearings, and from every possible point of view.

"I'm afraid she'll never take to Jack," prophesied Mr. McGrath in tones of dismal foreboding, after he had listened to the full unfolding of the tale. "She'll never forgive him that unfortunate bet."

"Nonsense, Terry," said Mrs. Forrester with a severe glance of reprimand. "You're a regular ignoramus, and understand no more about women and women's ways, despite your thirty odd years, than a baby unborn, probably not so much. Now listen to me. I know quite well what I am about. I have studied the psychological side of the feminine character, and I tell you girls like Miss Brewser, with plenty of dash and spirit, cannot be dealt with as the ordinary run of women. They require peculiar and judicious treatment. You leave it to me."

What would Mrs. Forrester have said in justification of her "peculiar and judicious treatment" could she at that moment have seen the girl of "dash and spirit" crying her heart out with mortification and the effects of

wounded pride? Would she have been *quite* so confident in the success of her undertaking, or so satisfied with the results of her labours? Might she not have come round to thinking that "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise," and that there is such a thing in this world as carrying even friendship too far?

CHAPTER VI.

THE next morning Kate was up betimes. She had only spoken truth when she confessed to a certain feeling of nervousness at making her first appearance in the hunting grounds of so crack a county as Huntingshire, and this sensation it was which prompted a more than ordinary solicitude as to the correctness of her equestrian attire. She was determined that it at least should come up to the most critical standard and be pronounced well nigh faultless, for two seasons' experience had sufficed to teach how the smallest deviation from existing fashions would surely be remarked by sharp and condemnatory feminine eyes, whose acute glances delighted rather in censure than in praise. From the men Kate feared nothing, but of her own sex she often avowed herself to be honestly afraid. She stood in awe of that section of fair beings who appraise every single article of dress, and who know to a nicety the price per yard of frillings, silks and laces, and

value their friends accordingly. Therefore, she took unusual pains on this particular morning, devoting quite an extra half-hour to the exigencies of the toilette.

But on looking into the glass, and scrutinising with friendly partiality the image therein reflected, a faint smile of satisfaction played around the corners of her mouth, for she could not help noticing how admirably the plain, close-fitting habit, dark-brown in colour, set off her trim figure to advantage, or how smart and natty the general effect proved.

"Thank goodness!" she exclaimed with a sigh of relief, not wholly devoid elation, "my new habit is a success. Without a wrinkle anywhere, and fits like a glove. Well, they won't be able to pick holes in my clothes to-day, however hard they may try!"

Now as no woman living, whether strong-minded or the reverse is utterly indifferent to outward appearances, the consciousness of being well-dressed and properly "got up" as the saying is, endowed Kate with comfort and fortitude and restored her self-possession to a degree, which under less favourable circumstances would certainly have been lacking.

When she descended into the hall, she found Mary Whitbread already equipped awaiting the arrival of her friend with the nearest approach to feelings of impatience her mild and equable nature was capable of exhibiting, while Brandy and Soda, not similarly blessed by a beneficent providence, stood furiously champing their bits at the door, sending the white soapsuds flying in every direction with each disdainful backward toss of the head. Stirrup, resplendent in a pair of new white moleskins and top-boots, felicitously united in his person an appearance of highly sporting proclivities, and extreme respectability, while his honest old face beamed unctuously on the world around, from beneath the brim of a curiously glossy chimney pot, both having received an extra polishing in honour of so auspicious an occasion.

"What an age you've been, Kate!" exclaimed Mary, on that young lady making her appearance. "I feel half inclined to preach you a lecture on the evils of unpunctuality. Do you know what the time is?"

"The clocks are wrong," said she with a smile, "and my white tie proved more than

usually obstinate. However, now let's be off."

The morning was bright and cloudless, with a clear pale blue sky, brilliant sun, and gentle breeze, which, save for an occasional sharpness, might have recalled the departed summer, and as the two girls drove merrily along, at a good smart nine-miles-an-hour trot—for Brandy and Soda were no laggards when once fairly started—their spirits rose. The exhilarating sensation of being borne swiftly through the air sent the colour to their cheeks and the light to their eyes. Before long their excitement increased on seeing strings of grooms and second horsemen, the latter leading riderless animals at a slow jog-trot out to covert. At this spectacle Kate's doubts about finding the way were finally set at rest. The road after a bit led through some huge grass fields, larger than any she had ever seen before, at each end of which were placed five-barred gates, to prevent the cattle from straying away, and opening these kept old Stirrup pretty well employed, forcing him to clamber in and out of the vehicle with an agility rather try-

ing to his aged bones, and still more so to his new boots. Fortunately the mud was not deep, and inflicted no serious injury, otherwise Stirrup's pride would have been greatly hurt, for he, like his mistress, was bent on putting his best foot foremost, and on upholding the credit of the establishment to the utmost of his feeble ability. To that end, ever since the small hours of the morning he had been busily engaged with a chamois leather in furbishing up the brass buttons on his coat, and the various bits and buckles adorning the horses. No effort on his part had been wanting to ensure the fulfilment of his aspirations, *i.e.*, that Kate should burst like some bright new star upon the hunting world of Foxington. All his hopes and ambition were centred in her, and the stud entrusted to his care.

"Talk of horses indeed. Where was the pair could be shown against King Olaf and the Duckling, while if it came to riding—he flattered himself he knew somebody who could hold her own with the best of them." So mused Stirrup, as he triumphantly surveyed Kate's back hair from the hinder seat

of the pony phaeton, and thought how impossible it was for anyone to compare with this incomparable mistress of his. Poor old Stirrup. Doubtless he entertained many delusions; nevertheless they were mostly of so pleasing and innocent a nature that the man must have been indeed hard-hearted who endeavoured to rob him of a single one. Happy are those who at the age of sixty believe in something and somebody.

Doddington, the place of meeting, proved an old-fashioned farm house, standing in a good big enclosure, which offered ample accommodation to hounds, huntsmen, and the multitude at large.

As the two girls drove up, a pretty sight met their eyes. The sun was shining down quite pleasantly and warmly on the solid grey stones of the picturesque building, lighting up with glorious tints the fading russet leaves of a large Virginian creeper, which entirely covered the porch. It glinted off the quaint latticed windows in scintillating rays, whose brilliancy almost blinded the spectator, and flickered lovingly on the purple asters, red sweet Williams and golden sunflowers, droop-

ing slowly in the autumnal air. Overhead the pale sky rose like a fathomless vault flecked with delicate streaks of snowy cloud, against which the tall old elms growing near stretched their long straight branches, while numberless rooks cawed and fluttered amongst the topmost twigs, circling round and round their home in a state of manifest anxiety caused by the appearance of such unaccustomed intruders. On the green grass, lay, stood and lounged, the white-and-tan beauties, with their noble heads, thoughtful brows and great dark wistful eyes. The elders taking their ease full length, like sensible creatures, as if cognizant of the work in store, the youngsters, walking and sniffing, rolling, playing, bounding, gambolling like so many children loosed from school, giving vent now and again to an occasional yelp when reminded by the crack of the whip that there were certain limits not lightly to be overstepped. In their midst, motionless, save for the glances of his quick, far-seeing eye, sat the huntsman, mounted on a grand chestnut horse, a magnificent specimen of the weight-carrying English hunter. Dressed

in a scarlet coat and black velvet cap, he looked a thorough workman from top to toe. That he loved his hounds, and they him, was clear at a glance. Every time they tried with upturned jowl and waving stern to leap to his side, Will Steadall's otherwise somewhat grave countenance relaxed into a smile, and with a word of caress he tossed each one in turn a morsel of biscuit. For thirteen years—years in the commencement, full of toil and trouble, had he carried the horn in the Critchley country, and thanks alone to his steady handling, judicious treatment and unwearied care, the pack now occupied the proud position of being considered about the best in England, while every winter the fields increased numerically until at length the old frequenters of the hunt exclaimed violently against these monster gatherings, the result of success and fashion. The Critchley, however, had not always been thus favoured, for when Will Steadall first took them in hand, deposing a drunken rascal who had reigned previously, he found the hounds a wild, ragged, riotous lot, unequal and uneven, without the smallest idea of discipline, and

who were wont to run a hare almost as readily as they would a fox. But since those days things had mightily changed and improved, and the last season or two the sport shown by the Critchley, had even by envious neighbouring competing packs, been admitted truly exceptional. Therefore, people flocked to their meets by the score.

To-day, Will Steadall waited as usual for the Master to give the signal for an onward move. Meantime, folks continued to arrive singly and in groups. Scattered about in various directions were dismounted grooms buckling up straps, altering stirrups, finally adjusting girths, loosening nosebands, and straightening manes, while in most cases a red-coated runner or astute rustic stood near at hand eagerly pressing his services, in the hopes of gaining an odd coin or so, wherewith to enable him to retire promptly to the nearest public and expend the donation in a drop of "something comforting." Carts, gigs, pony chaises, waggonettes, Victorias bearing pretty fur-wrapped women, and barouches with haughty matrons, all served, despite the somewhat early hour to swell the crowd and block

the only available means of approach and egress. The hospitable owner of the farm, who was a staunch supporter of fox-hunting, aided by sundry labourers, was engaged in passing round among the company trays of bread and cheese, supplemented by huge jugs of frothy beer, which he kindly pressed upon not unwilling friends and neighbours, while sherry decanter in hand he begged numerous gentlemen of his acquaintance to partake of a glass if only "for the good of the house." Altogether it formed a bright, pleasant, bustling, active scene, such as is nowhere met with out of the mother country, in whose sons and daughters love of sport appears almost universal, rendering them distinct from those of nearly every other nation, except possibly the Hungarians, who seem to a certain extent, to inherit similar tastes.

And now a move was apparently imminent. Therefore Stirrup led King Olaf forth from the outer shed, where he had already excited considerable admiration, greatly to the worthy man's gratification. Handing the ribbons over to Mary Whitbread, and telling her to keep the ponies out as long as she felt

inclined and was enjoying herself, Kate, casting aside her ulster, lightly sprang into the saddle and gently took up the reins, while Stirrup proceeded to adjust her skirt satisfactorily and place her feet in the elastic straps.

All being at length arranged, he clambered up on to the Duckling. When they saw the hounds, and began to understand winter had come round once more, bringing with it the delights of the chase, both horses pricked their ears, snorted, and manifested every sign of lively pleasure. King Olaf bent his head, arched his beautiful neck, which shone like burnished gold in the sunshine, and pawed the ground impetuously as if eager to be off without further delay, while Kate, sitting firm and square, with true balance, left shoulder forwards, hands down, elbows in, and upright carriage, remained perfectly still, seemingly careless enough, but actually prepared for any little vagaries which King Olaf in the exuberance of his heart or heels might be prepared to give vent to. These two were finely suited, and no strangers one to the other, and Kate knew full well that

with light mouth and high courage all King Olaf required was quiet handling on her part. He did not like being pulled at; he wanted leave *to go*! And when hounds ran, go he could, without mistake or even temporary hesitation.

On horseback she felt in her natural sphere. At crowded parties, in mixed assemblies, among a large concourse of people, a curious sense of loneliness, of unsatisfied longing, constantly overtook her, while each advancing year rendered the frivolity and the insincerity of the world of fashion still more apparent, but in the saddle such feelings knew no place. They vanished as if by magic, leaving her supremely happy. She thoroughly enjoyed the sensation of power and management—the springy movements, the play of the bit, the life, the stir, the action, the excitement, and above all the independence conferred by horse exercise. She loved horses, often declaring she preferred them to human beings, and what's more, knew that she could ride, perhaps not so well as Mrs. Forrester (*she* was an artiste), but certainly infinitely better than the

majority of women. Without undue vanity, she could not help being aware of the fact that she possessed "good hands," a gift apparently inherent, and as rarely acquired, though one without which no individual can be considered a horseman in the true sense of the word; for good hands go farther than any other qualification to establish that cordial *entente* between man and beast—that secret affinity which can afford to defy danger and triumph over every obstacle.

Kate looked about her now in the hope of discovering her acquaintance of the day before; but Mrs. Forrester, too old and cunning a sportswoman not to save her horse every possible inch, invariably ascertained from the Master beforehand the covert first to be called upon, and seldom put in an appearance until the hounds had reached their destination. Coffee-housing at the meet, however agreeable and amusing, she considered of comparatively smaller value than an additional quarter of an hour in the stable given to her animal. The selling of horses was a legitimate business, and only to be conducted under the most favourable circum-

stances; therefore anything that conduced in the smallest degree to any adverse conditions was to be utterly and entirely condemned.

The young thoroughbreds she generally made were nearly always impetuous and excitable, and it answered Mrs. Forrester's purpose better, and appeared sounder wisdom, not to send them on to covert in company, when loquacious individuals of an inquiring turn of mind were apt to find out more about them than was desirable, but rather to jog them on quietly herself, and turn up just when the fox had broken away, and people were too greatly occupied with their own affairs to bestow much attention on those of their neighbours. Such were the tactics pursued by Mrs. Forrester—tactics which fully accounted for her non-appearance at the meet.

Meantime Kate could not remain unconscious of the exceedingly rude way in which some of the ladies present stared at her, just as if she had been a savage beast at a show; but although such conduct appeared highly indelicate, she was too happy and too light-

hearted to allow it to disturb her serenity. Although warned to a certain extent by Mrs. Forrester of the exclusiveness of a particular clique, she had failed to understand how it regarded every fresh arrival with suspicion, as an "outsider," and how only after years had gone by could she hope to be incorporated as "one of themselves," or as belonging to the class denominated by it "The Right Sort." In fact, it took this coterie about five years to make up its fastidious mind whether the stranger were worthy the honour of being called upon, yet another five before anything like intimacy could take place, but by the end of fifteen it suddenly awoke to the fact that Mr. or Mrs. So-and-So was an exceedingly pleasant person, and very much improved since his or her first entry into the county.

Such were Huntingshire manners, and only Kate's ignorance induced her to ascribe to them an unusual degree of incivility. If they summed her up, she in her quiet little way could do the same, and she pronounced the men cold and self-satisfied, the women rude as only ladies can be. These were her

first impressions, subject to some modifications.

But now at length a move was really made, and as they jogged on in one long procession—carriages, equestrians, and foot-people all interspersed—Kate's faculties were fully engaged in restraining the ardour which prompted King Olaf, with a squeal of delight, to bound up, all fours at a time, into the air, and then edge nearer and nearer to the hounds, until every moment he was in danger of treading upon them, as first one and then another dallied by the roadside, unheeding of the angry admonitions bestowed by the two whips on their procrastinating tendencies. Although the company assembled was so large, cub-hunting, not the legitimate chase, still remained the order of the day, and far too well did Will Steadall understand his business to allow for one moment of its being otherwise, or (despite various suggestive hints) countenancing the smallest deviation from the lawful work of the day—namely, the slaughter of the juveniles.

As usual on such occasions, more particularly at the commencement of the season,

the keenness displayed by the field, and the impatience to indulge its jumping proclivities, was something quite remarkable. Every other man nearly appeared possessed with the insane idea of showing off his own or his animal's capabilities. Several cock fences proved too enticing to be resisted by a certain portion of the community, whom Will Steadall eyed with an air of undisguised contempt.

"*They* call themselves sportsmen indeed!" he exclaimed in disgust. "Why, these young sparks would just as soon jump on a 'ound as look at 'im. They're nothing but a combination of swagger and hignorance. I declare I've no patience wi' em."

Therefore great was his delight, and hearty his laughter, when a gentleman of the class above referred to, mounted on a vicious chestnut mare, came charging down at a tempting looking obstacle, ignoring the gate close by, and on the animal stopping suddenly short and wheeling round to the left, sending her exquisitely clothed rider flying head over heels into the muddy ditch beyond.

"Serves him jolly well right," remarked Will Steadall *sotto voce*, while a grim smile illuminated his countenance. "I should like to see more of 'em treated exactly the same."

Soon after this little episode the hounds were put into covert, and before many minutes had gone by the music of their tongues made itself heard, ringing out on the still air as they rattled the cubs up and down, and crashed through the stiff undergrowth in a steady, resolute fashion which left Reynard but little leisure, and filled the parent foxes with anxious forebodings anent the future of their young. Every now and again, with bewildered mien, heaving sides, and hanging tongue, a youthful and inexperienced hound leaped out of covert, gazing around in a state of vague uncertainty, until sharply admonished by the whip. Then a sudden stillness would ensue, broken only by a faint, tremulous whine, until once more, as one by one they took up the scent, the hounds burst forth into a joyous chorus of sound, and the horses turned with the well-loved voices like the practised hunters most

of them were, while the young ones, mad with excitement, danced about on their hind legs or snatched impatiently at the restraining bit.

It was quite an hour or more before a well-grown cub, bolder than his companions, and goaded by a courage probably born of despair, ventured to face the open. In an instant a deafening noise ensued, and horsemen by the score galloped frantically in the wake of the retreating animal. A few seconds elapsed before Will Steadall emerged from the centre of the covert, vociferously blowing his horn. One glance sufficed for his practised eye to take in the situation. Horsemen to the rear, horsemen to the front, horsemen on the roads, horsemen on every side, horsemen determined on leading the way, with or without huntsman and hounds.

"'Old 'ard, gentlemen, *please*," screamed Will Steadall indignantly. "You can't 'unt without any 'ounds. Give 'em a chance, now do. You're only a spoiling of your own sport. There ain't a bit of use in 'urrying, not a bit."

But he might as well have whistled to the

four winds as have attempted to restrain a Critchley crowd in its matutinal ardour. No general upon the face of this earth could have marshalled it into order after a summer's interregnum, with a fox viewed away and two or three convenient gates in close proximity. Therefore Will Steadall gathered his favourites together as quickly as possible, leaving the whips to collect the missing hounds, and with the dash for which he was renowned got them out of covert without delay. Meantime the hustling, jostling multitude charged the nearest gate in a body, jamming through it with hot haste, regardless of oaths, abjurations, and kicking horses, and Kate, hardly realising what she was about, found herself engulfed in this moving mass of equestrians, all eager to push through the narrow opening simultaneously, and all selfishly bent on the advancement of No. 1. Not until the crush subsided and people began to scatter in a huge grass field did she perceive the hounds, with Will Steadall in close attendance, streaming away immediately in front. Then for the first time that day she was able to

give King Olaf his head without fear of treading on the heels of those in the van, and could let him sweep along at his will over the rolling ridge and furrow, which, with short, quick, active strides, he seemed to skim like a swallow. Kate's heart rose within her, and already the light of pleasurable excitement danced in her grey eyes. They were coming to a fence—her first one—for half through fear of making a fool of herself and half through an innate caution which prompted her to regulate her actions, in a strange country by those of the majority she had hitherto virtuously refrained from jumping, and gone sedately through the gates in spite of an intense desire to follow the example of the larkers. But now she must do one of two things. She must either go straight ahead and after the fashion of the leading horsemen take the fence boldly, or else she must cast in her lot with that of a large section of the field, who immediately instituted a manœuvre in a seemingly opposite direction to the one in which the hounds were running. Kate's mind was made up in an instant. The obstacle now facing her was a

hedge of ordinary size, rendered dangerous, however, by the presence of a wide and extremely blind ditch on the taking off side, into which a couple of horses had already blundered, pitching their riders over their heads. Kate, however, was still too young, and her nerve too good, to be deterred by trivial misfortunes. King Olaf and his mistress were apparently in entire unison, for no sooner did he catch sight of the fence than he cocked his small veined ears, laid hold of the bit, and quickening his pace went at the obstacle with a determination not to be denied. Kate loved jumping quite as well as he did; she therefore kept his head straight, and in the last stride or two just steadied him a wee bit. The horse took off beautifully, and the next instant landed far into the field beyond, having cleared the hedge like a stag.

“By Jove! Did you see that? What a nailing good fencer to be sure!” observed the Honble. Jack to his immediate companion, Captain Fuller, as galloping side by side they endeavoured to regain the ground lost by a bad start. “There aren’t many

horses out to-day know their business better, I'll lay a bob."

"I daresay not, he's a niceish horse, and what's more the girl can ride a bit. It's Miss Brewser, I believe," responded the other, somewhat incoherently, for his arms were being almost pulled out of their sockets by the long raking animal he bestrode. "Who-ay! Bessie lass—take it easy now," as she yawed her head in the most unmerciful manner. "No need to tire both of us out so early in the day."

"Miss Brewser! did you say? She's not half a bad looking girl either. I declare she rode at that fence in regular steeplechase form, both hands steady on the reins, and never raised them an inch. It's not often one sees a woman do that, and I began to wonder who this new Diana was."

"Fancy your doing such a thing! Why, she's *your* heiress, Clinker."

"Not *my* heiress more than anybody else's," he replied with a frown. "I wish all you fellows would drop that stupid chaff. It's not fair to the girl, more especially to a nice one as this Miss Brewser seems to be."

Captain Fuller, feeling he had imprudently started a vexed question, made no answer, but allowed Bessie to snatch at him with a trifle greater freedom, whereby she soon distanced the Colonel's more sedate and comfortable mount.

During the above short colloquy hounds had continued to run fairly well, but alas! cubs as a rule lack the stamina of their parents, and quickly yield up their lives to a clamorous and bloodthirsty pack. Already the hunted fox began to twist and turn in every direction, rendering it clear that this merry little spin was destined to be of very short duration, brief as sweet. Having just flown a flight of rails, to her own and King Olaf's intense satisfaction, Kate was sailing away, well in front, with Miss Palliser only a few lengths behind. But that lady's ambitious soul brooked no opposition, and the sight of a rival's skirt fluttering anywhere in her vicinity filled it with envy and malice. She urged her big bay onwards by every means in her power, but though a good stout game horse he was no match in point of speed for King Olaf. The chestnut could

gallop away from him with the greatest ease, as Miss Palliser quickly discovered, to her no small mortification ; while Kate, quite unconscious of having roused any inimical sentiments, joyously pursued her way. But just when horses and riders were really warming to their work, and the glorious excitement of the chase sent a glow through their frames, Reynard's heart failed him, and he made a last convulsive effort to retrace his footsteps and return to the shelter of the friendly covert he had so recently and so rashly forsaken. At first this stratagem appeared likely to meet with success, but when within a hundred yards of the desired haven, the foremost hound—old Caroline—ran at him with a rush, seized him in her long sharp teeth, and rolled him over in the yellow edish, which doubtless had often been witness to his infantine gambols. Poor cub ! If his life had been short, his death at least was a swift and merciful one ! Out of harm's way, fat fowls, early lambs, and young rabbits would henceforth be indifferent to him, while the sharp teeth of old Caroline were surely less torturing than those of a trap.

In a second Will Steadall was on his feet, surrounded by the hounds. "Leu leu, pull him, leu leu, pull him," he cried in tones of encouragement to the young ones, as they tore at Reynard's remains and fought for some choice morsel. "Yoloighty, yoloighty. Down, Cracker—get away Christobel." While the customary obsequies were being performed the Field came galloping in from all sides, highly delighted with so satisfactory a kill in the open and the part each individual had played. "Nice little spin," they said one to the other, though most of them had arrived nearly quarter of an hour after time and could have seen but little of it. "Looks like a good scent." So they stood and chatted amicably, while the hounds lay down on the grass and rested for a few minutes after their recent exertions, the day being warm and the sun somewhat overpowering and antagonistic to active exercise.

Meantime Kate, who had been wondering what had become of Stirrup, now spied him among the crowd, and beckoned him to come to her side. She could contain her elation no longer, and felt she must impart it to some-

one; therefore, who better and more sympathetic than he?

"Oh! Stirrup," she said in a triumphant whisper, "we've had such fun! I'm so glad we came, aren't you? I've broken the ice too, and taken my first fence in good style. I wish you could have seen King Olaf. He covered himself with glory, and jumped it most beautifully, though two horses came to grief right under his nose."

"I seed 'im, miss," returned Stirrup in tones of unqualified approval. "'Ow other 'osses misbehaves of 'emselves make no odds to 'im. Ee don't mean falling, not ee. Why lor bless you, Miss Kate, ee jumped that ere 'edge with hat least a yard to spare. There was not another 'oss cleared it in the same form. Hi seed two of them young swells looking at 'im, as much as to say, 'Ee's a good un, ee is.' King Holaf will hopen some o' their eyes before long, hi'll be bound, for hall the airs and graces they gives 'emselves, just as if they were better nor other folks. Hi should dearly ha' liked to 'ave followed you, Miss Kate, but when you got so well hover, sez hi to myself, sez I,

‘ The Duckling’s mortal fresh, and the ground be still uncommon ’ard in places, hit would be a terr’bul pity to knock ’im about.’ So hi went with the second ’ossmen on to the road ’ard by, for I knowed as ’ow them there cubs aint never of much haccount, and run backuds and forrards for all the world just like a ’are. Lor, miss, but the way some hof these fine red-coated gents shirk is something hawful. No one would believe it as ’ad not seen it with ’is own eyes. Why there aint a ’arf nor yet a quarter as rides a yard. Hit’s all show and purtence. They likes to dress ’emselves hup, and jog habout in company, and that’s pretty nigh hall they do do, except talk. Bless my ’art, once the danger his at an end, they can talk a cat’s ’ead off. Mahogany sportsmen, hi calls ’em. Does all their ’unting with a good bottle of wine, and their legs hunder the table, but werry little when they are heither side hof a ’oss. Leastways that’s my hopinion. Hi thinks nothink of hall that brag and bounce, the quiet ones is the ones for me. Them as says, little but can hact.”

.. “Dear me ! Stirrup,” said Kate with a

touch of compunction. "I'm afraid I shall be put down in the list of 'mahogany sportsmen.' But I was so delighted with King Olaf I could not help telling you how well he had gone. I hope you did not think me *very* full of brag and bounce."

Young monkey! She knew perfectly what opinion Stirrup entertained of her, and was only fishing for compliments.

"Lor bless me now, Miss Kate!" said he remonstratingly. "The hidea of such ha thing entering your 'ead. Why there aint henuff brag and bounce about *you*, you're too modest haltogether, and has for King Holaf, hit does my old 'art good to 'ear 'im spoken well hoff, and to know as 'ow ee is properly appreciated. You'll never get his ekal, Miss Kate, if you live to be a 'undred."

"I don't suppose I shall, Stirrup. But now we have surely waited here long enough. What do you imagine the next move is likely to be?"

"They is pretty shure to 'ang about 'ere for hanother 'our or so. There be two or three more cubs left in covert, and the 'untsman will roust 'em hup a bit more afore

ee leaves 'em halone. Maybe, hits 'is last chance this season."

"In that case, Stirrup, it seems almost a pity to keep the Duckling out longer. He has just had a nice morning's exercise, and I shall want to ride him myself the day after to-morrow in all probability."

"And 'ow about you, Miss Kate? Hi don't like leaving you all halone. There's them there gates to hopen, and some of 'em be uncommon hawkerd for a lady to lift."

"No matter! Depend upon it I shall manage somehow," she answered confidently. "Perhaps I may ride home in company; and if the worst comes to the worst I can always get off and walk."

"Now look ee 'ere, Miss Kate dear, if hi goes away and leaves you by yourself, don't ee go riding so forrard. The ditches is just hawful blind this time of year, and the werry best of 'osses is liable to make mistakes. Bear the saying in mind, 'Afore Christmas old 'ard, after Christmas ride 'ard.' So do be careful; and if hi might make so bold has to advise, don't keep King Holaf out werry late. Remember hit's 'is first day, and ee'll be

wanted later on. An hexcitable hanimal like 'im takes a lot hout o' hisself."

With which parting admonitions as to the welfare of the two beings he loved best on the face of this earth, old Stirrup somewhat reluctantly turned the Duckling's head towards home. He had a sort of vague, confused idea that, in spite of her command, he was not acting rightly in leaving his mistress unprotected to find her way back as best she might, in an entirely strange country, where she herself was completely unknown. Orders were orders however, and had to be obeyed. When Kate said a thing Stirrup knew she expected that thing to be done, and resistance beyond a certain point was unavailing.

Meantime Mrs. Paget and Miss Palliser, standing almost within earshot, had been engaged in an animated exchange of ideas, of which Kate Brewser, happily for her, was the unconscious object.

"What do you think of our new lady?" asked Mrs. Paget confidentially, edging up to her friend, and setting the ball a rolling. "Is she likely to prove an acquisition?"

"*This* Miss Brewser I suppose you mean," returned Miss Palliser, with an animation so simple a question seemed hardly calculated to provoke.

"Yes, this Miss Brewser. This wonderful heiress everyone is talking about, and who they seem to say will turn all the heads of the Foxington bachelors?"

"The Foxington bachelors in that case cannot possess any very great modicum of brains *to turn*," said Miss Palliser sarcastically. "Are they in the habit of running after every strange young person who enters the country?"

"Ah! my dear, that's exactly it. I call her position a most questionable one. Two girls, without any chaperone or female escort, setting up for themselves in this independent manner, hardly seem, to my mind, quite—quite the thing."

"Who are they? Does anyone know anything about their antecedents?"

"Miss Brewser is Scotch, I believe. Beyond that I can say little."

"She may not even be *respectable*," said Miss Palliser, with an air of extreme pro-

priety. "I wonder whether people intend to call?"

"Mrs. Forrester has done so already."

"Just like her, and at her age I dare say it can't signify much one way or the other; but you and I, my dear, really ought to be more circumspect."

Miss Palliser had reached the borderland, when ten years more or less are not supposed to make much difference, nevertheless she still considered her reputation a pearl of spotless price, to be kept from contamination just as carefully as in the days of her girlhood. In fact, from her manner and conversation she appeared quite oblivious of the fact that that sunny period had long ago been left behind.

"I suppose the men are sure to make up to her," continued Mrs. Paget.

"My dear," and Miss Palliser fixed a severe glance upon her friend, "*whenever and wherever* in this world the slightest *soupsçon* of impropriety exists, the smallest symptom of something wrong, there you may be sure the men will always flock. They have *no* morals, *no* principle, *no* resolution. The faster, and

the worse style this Miss Brewser is the better they will probably like her, and the more they will run after her. Now-a-days virtue is not appreciated." And certainly as represented by Miss Palliser, it was easily to be believed, for a sourer, more malignant looking and uglier woman it would have been difficult to conceive. From the moment King Olaf had shown his superiority she had sworn eternal enmity against Kate. Personally she knew nothing in the girl's disfavour; but the mere fact of having proved herself capable of holding her own in the hunting field was sufficient to render her an object of envy and detestation.

"I'll tell you one thing," whispered Miss Palliser mysteriously.

"Yes," said Mrs. Paget, all attention.

"What is it?"

"Why, she can't ride one little bit; she came at a tiny flying fence just now a hundred miles an hour without the smallest control over her horse, and all but knocked me over."

This was a story, and Miss Palliser knew it was a story, seeing that when Kate had

jumped the fence in question she (Miss Palliser) had happened to be quite a couple of lengths in the rear, but it answered her purpose just as well as any other statement, and served to establish a *casus belli*.

"She's plucky," observed Mrs. Paget, actuated by a higher sense of justice.

"Plucky? So's the bird that dashes itself against the iron railings of its cage; so's the dog that threatens to bite you when his bone is withdrawn, and the beasts of the field, and the birds of the air. Plucky indeed! I tell you she's as ignorant as a babe in swaddling clothes; I doubt even if she knows how to stick on, let alone set a horse at a fence. People like that ought to stay at home, and not come out hunting. They are a perfect nuisance and positively dangerous. As for judgment she has not a scrap; and from her manner is not likely to acquire it. No, no, depend upon it the kindest thing we can wish Miss Brewster is, that she may get a rattling good fall, the sooner the better, which will either teach caution or lay her up for the rest of the season."

"Oh! I daresay she knows nothing about

riding. How should she, poor thing?" remarked Mrs. Paget compassionately, who, in virtue of her tender years, was inclined to look upon Kate's shortcomings more leniently than did Miss Palliser. "Nobody, to my knowledge, has ever heard of her in the Shires before now."

Mrs. Paget was the wife of a retired brewer, who considered Huntingshire the acmé of fashion, and a hot bed of the aristocracy, and who had once been heard to assert he only cared for hunting on account of the good society to be met with in the hunting field.

"I should think not," said Miss Palliser, with a sneer. "Do you know, I would not be the least surprised if she turned out no better than she ought. Such things have happened before now."

"Well, anyhow she rides good horses. That chestnut is a perfect beauty."

"Yes; it's a sad pity to see such a fine hunter so completely wasted. However, I suppose money is no object. But tell me, my dear, what do you say to her figure? Don't you call it rather—rather"—pausing in search of a suitable adjective—"peculiar?"

“Well, I don’t know; there is something a little odd about it perhaps. Nevertheless, until you called my attention to the fact, I was inclined to consider it tolerably good. She carries herself well.”

“Good? Well I never heard such a thing! Fancy *you* thinking it good, Mrs. Paget. I really should have thought you would have known better.”

“Did I say good?” seeing she was in danger of losing caste, and overcome by the other’s superior decisions. “Let me have another look. Oh! yes, I was mistaken after all; only moderate—very moderate.”

“Plenty of padding,” suggested Miss Palliser, considerably appeased. “Looks like a hen turkey with its breast well trussed.”

“Ha, ha! An excellent simile, and uncommonly neatly put.”

“I daresay,” continued Miss Palliser, in tones of depreciation, “that *men* may admire Miss Brewster’s figure, but all right minded people know how to value *their* admiration at its proper worth. Their ideas on such subjects are so extremely odd, to say the least of it. Personally, I care a great deal more for the

opinions of my own sex than I do for those of a parcel of silly, wild, flighty boys. However that's neither here nor there. If people see anything to admire in Miss Brewser they are free to do so for aught it affects me; all I can say is, that she is not *my* style of beauty. I prefer something quieter, more refined, and less masculine."

Miss Palliser's cheeks were of a mottled purple, relieved by patches of solferino at the point of the nose and chin, and it was a remarkable fact that during all the years she had hunted in Huntingshire no living soul had ever yet been able to discover what *was* her "*style*" of feminine beauty. Never had anyone proved so fastidious in her tastes. Thin ladies she objected to altogether; also stout, tall, obese, long waisted, short legged, medium, dark, and fair ones. The only conclusion possible to arrive at was, that the single style Miss Palliser honestly and genuinely admired was her own particular style, and as nobody else did, it showed how wise and how merciful was the invisible Providence ruling over mankind.

"I don't think Miss Brewser has altogether

such a *very* bad seat on horseback," observed Mrs. Paget, after a slight pause. "I've seen worse."

"Mrs. Paget, I *did* think *you* knew what a seat was," returned Miss Palliser scornfully. "*You*, who've hunted here, off and on, ever since your marriage; and I'm sorry to be unable to agree. But here's Colonel Clinker," as that gentleman passed close by. "*He* knows what's what; I'll ask *his* opinion."

The Honble. Jack knew both ladies well, and liked neither, more especially Miss Palliser, but at mention of his own name he felt bound to stop and enquire if he could render them any service.

"What do you want to ask me?" he said in a cold but courteous tone. "Anything very important is it?"

"Oh, no Colonel! not exactly important," said Miss Palliser insinuatingly. "Only Mrs. Paget here declares that Miss Brewser has a good figure and a good seat on horseback, and knowing you to be an authority, I thought I would just make an appeal to *head-quarters*. *You* don't think so *surely*?"

and she looked at him out of her little pig eyes.

Years ago Jack Clinker had seen through the petty spite and jealousy of which Miss Palliser's nature was capable, and despised her accordingly. As often as she made advances, just so often did he rebuff them. Captain Fuller's remark had left him in no mood to discuss the heiress, and after seeing her ride certainly not to do so hostilely. Besides he took a pleasure in aggravating Miss Palliser.

"Mrs. Paget is quite right," he answered brusquely. "Miss Brewser has one of the prettiest figures and nicest seats I have seen for a long time, and there are very few women can ride over a fence in the way she did a few minutes ago. Added to which qualifications, she appears to be a thorough lady." With which cutting remark Jack Clinker slightly raised his hat and rode off. "What brutes some women are to be sure," he muttered to himself in disgust. "Old devil! why can't she leave the poor girl alone. And all because Miss Brewser happened to cut her out in a miserable little ten

minutes' spin. Faugh! I declare it's enough to sicken one with the sex altogether."

Miss Palliser turned green, and looked completely dumbfounded. She had expected to find an ally, instead of which a daring and determined enemy had confronted her, unexpectedly but none the less surely. Besides which Colonel Clinker's opinion carried considerable weight throughout the county.

"You've put your foot in it nicely," said Mrs. Paget, with an attempt at consolation, which did not prove altogether satisfactory to its intended object.

"I don't care if I have," returned Miss Palliser angrily. "I can see through a stone wall as easily as most people, and I call it positively disgusting. Do you suppose that if this Miss Brewster were a penniless lass Colonel Clinker would constitute himself her champion in this ridiculous fashion? No, not he! It's the money he's after. That's as clear as clear can be. I repeat, I call it disgusting. If you and I were heiresses *we* should have all the men toddling round us in just the same way."

But, even Mrs. Paget ventured to think, in spite of this assertion, that Miss Palliser laboured under a slight delusion. She was weak, easily influenced, and entertained the most profound respect for Colonel Clinker as a scion of that aristocracy whom she revered next only to her Creator.

"I think you were a *little* too much down on Miss Brewser," she said, beginning to waver in her allegiance.

"Tut, Mrs. Paget, do you suppose *I'm* going to follow your example, and model *all* my opinions by those of the Honble. Jack?" responded Miss Palliser with a sneer that made Mrs. Paget blush to the roots of her hair. "*You* may look up to the nobility if you like, *I* don't care twopence about them." Whereupon, after delivering this Parthian dart, which went quivering straight to poor guilty Mrs. Paget's heart, Miss Palliser turned her horse wrathfully aside and put an end to a conversation which had ended less harmoniously than it had commenced.

Meanwhile the morning was wearing away, and a fresh move was made in the direction of a covert some two or three miles distant,

which necessitated a long jog at that back-breaking pace so extremely trying to ladies. Mrs. Forrester now came up and shook hands with Kate. "Good morning, Miss Brewser," she said. "I have seen you several times in the distance, but never had an opportunity of saying a word, and have contented myself with admiring your horse. I want to introduce you to our Master, Mr. Bingham. He's very quiet, but a nice sort of man when you get to know him, and he's just been asking who you were."

"Really," answered Kate; "I am very much flattered, and shall be happy to make his acquaintance. Indeed, to tell the truth, I was just beginning to feel a little forlorn, having sent my man home some time ago, and no one since then having taken pity on my isolation." Whereupon Mrs. Forrester promptly effected an introduction.

"Make yourself civil," she whispered significantly into the Master's ear. "For it's worth your while to conciliate an excellent subscriber. The young lady is rolling in wealth, and sure to be good for a couple of ponies."

"Thank you, Mrs. Forrester," returned he with a wink and a smile. "You've always an eye to the main chance, even when on pleasure bent."

Whether owing to this remark of the lady's or not it would be impossible to say, but before long Kate was surprised to find how exceedingly chatty and pleasant the "quiet, nice sort of man" could be. They got on famously, and soon made friends, so that the remainder of the jog to the covert was performed under favourable circumstances. Arrived at their fresh destination, the number of foxes appeared truly bewildering, and such a long time was spent in tow-rowing the cubs, that the prospect of a run became more and more remote. It was now half-past two o'clock, and Kate, mindful of Stirrup's parting injunctions, determined on making tracks for home, more especially as she heard the hounds were likely to draw farther and farther away from Foxington. She therefore enquired the way from a ruddy-faced and obliging farmer who happened to be near, and he assured her she could not possibly mistake it, provided she felt equal

to opening sundry gates. Thus enlightened, Kate turned King Olaf's head towards Sport Lodge. The horse had fretted a good deal during the long period of inaction that had taken place. He was still very fresh, and exhibited a decided reluctance to quit his companions; but once fairly out of sight and sound of the hounds, he quickly settled down into a long swinging trot, which soon put a considerable distance between them. Kate followed the high road till she came to a recently painted hand post, where she had been bidden to turn sharp to the right, keeping on a bridle path which led across the fields for a couple of miles, when once more she would emerge on the turnpike close by Foxington. Now, as has been seen, Miss Brewser was an exceedingly independent young person, accustomed to rely upon her own resources, therefore she felt in no wise disconcerted at the prospect of riding home alone, as a good many ladies similarly circumstanced might have done. The only drawback consisted in King Olaf's dislike to gates. Instead of standing docilely while his mistress endeavoured to raise the latch, he

was always in such a desperate hurry that he insisted on trying to force his way through before the gate was fairly ajar, thereby often occasioning Kate various rather unpleasant bumps and bruises. Horses, like people, are not made absolutely perfect, and King Olaf must be forgiven for possessing this one fault.

Despite sundry little casualties of the above nature, Kate managed to get through the first two or three gates tolerably satisfactorily, and was just beginning to congratulate herself on her achievements, when a slight damper was put on her self-esteem by a barrier which baffled every effort, and remained obstinately closed in spite of both force and persuasion. It was doubly fastened with a bar and an iron hook. This latter, after repeated essays, Kate did manage to undo, but the gate itself remained immovable, requiring a man's strength to heave it up from the ground. In the midst of her difficulties, and by way of making matters worse, King Olaf grew suddenly impatient, and began to back away, during one of which slight vagaries her hunting crop was

torn from her hand. Years ago it had been given her by her uncle, and engraved with her name, and she would not have lost this present of his for worlds; besides which without it she was completely handicapped. For a few seconds the girl felt almost *non-plussed*, but she possessed a resolute disposition that could not bear to be beaten in anything it undertook. She wanted to get home, and she wanted to regain her lost crop, and the only way to arrive at these results appeared to be by dismounting. In her pocket she invariably carried a stout leather strap, which in the event of an emergency like the present she was in the habit of buckling on to her stirrip, and by this contrivance was able to reach her foot up far enough to place it in the lengthened loop and then swing herself into the saddle. But what you can do with a quiet, steady, tired-out animal at the end of a long day's hunting, and what you can do with a remarkably fresh and high-couraged one after only a few hours' easy exercise, are two very different things, as Kate now discovered to her cost. To descend from the saddle was

comparatively simple, but to re-gain it a most laborious and difficult undertaking, for every time she made an attempt King Olaf dodged and fidgeted, fidgeted and dodged, till Kate was fairly worn out, and her temper raised to so unwonted a pitch of exasperation that she actually went the length of applying the epithet "brute!" upon her favourite but certainly tantalizing hunter. She looked around, but not a soul was in sight to come to her assistance. Once more her resolutions were quickly taken, and she decided on trudging the rest of the way on foot, consoling herself meanwhile with the philosophical reflection that "What cannot be helped must be endured."

Therefore, picking up her habit in one hand, and taking hold of King Olaf's bridle with the other, she started off at a good round pace. She had not however gone above half-a-mile, and had already begun to discover that patent leather riding-boots and lengthened pedestrian exercise were highly incompatible one with the other, before she was startled by hearing a voice close behind say—

"I hope you have not met with an accident."

Her first impulse was one of relief, her second to notice that the horseman, who thus addressed her, was mounted on a sporting black mare, and was decidedly good-looking. He had fair hair, honest grey-blue eyes, a smiling open countenance, and a manly upright carriage, which impressed Kate favourably at first sight.

"Is anything the matter?" he repeated, riding up alongside. "Have you had a fall?"

"Oh! dear no," answered she airily, now that help was at hand, determined to make light of her adventures. "I could not open the last gate, it was so heavy, and after bungling for ever so long, dropped my hunting crop. Being a favourite one, I got off to pick it up, and then was unable to remount, consequently had to have recourse to Shanks's mare. Are *all* the gates about here equally refractory?"

"Some of them *are* awkward I admit, particularly for a lady. To tell the truth I wonder you got on as well as you did. Many fair equestriennes of my acquaintance stand *in the same awe* of a five barred gate, as of a

full grown bull, and cannot stir without a groom riding close to their horse's tail."

"They ought not to come out hunting then," said Kate, decisively. "Women have no business to be so stupid and such cowards."

The stranger laughed, seemingly amused at her sentiments.

"Don't you think the farmers are more to blame," he said, with a smile, "who fasten up their gates by all sorts of such odious contrivances, that often—even we men, are at our wits' ends how to undo them, and were it not for such a thing as hinges, would many times be stopped in the midst of a good run! The ladies are not so much in fault as you appear to imagine."

"I am glad for *their* sakes, they should have found so chivalrous and so courteous a champion," answered Kate, politely, though a trifle sarcastically.

He looked at her, as if not quite sure whether she were joking or in earnest.

"You are too flattering," he replied in the same tone. "But the courtesy of which you speak is not very apparent, so long as I re-

main seated, and you standing. Allow me to assist you on to your horse." So saying he jumped down to the ground.

Now the sound of the human voice is a wonderful index of character, and possesses immense powers of attraction and repulsion. A pleasant toned voice goes far towards creating a favourable impression, and in the new comer's was a soft truthful ring, which inspired Kate with confidence, and made her oblivious to the fact of this gentleman's being an utter stranger.

"Do you know how?" she asked, saucily. "I'm awfully heavy remember."

"I'm not afraid of that," he replied, apparently confident in his own powers. "Try me."

Kate placed her foot somewhat coyly, in the palm of his broad hand—she noticed it was broad, and thought men's hands ought to be so—and the next instant with a dexterous hoist, he sent her flying into the saddle.

"Capital!" she exclaimed, not a little pleased to find herself there again. "Stirrup *himself* could not have done it better."

“Who’s Stirrup?”

“Oh! Stirrup’s my groom, and such a dear old man! Still as he does not always accompany me out hunting the very first time I come to grief, I shall know now where to apply for help. There’s nothing like a friend in need.”

“Do. Let that be a bargain. All the same, I hope,” turning the frank blue eyes full upon her, “the day will never come when you may meet with a bad accident. If there is one sight in the whole world I hate more than another, it is seeing a lady fall. Your limbs are so delicate, compared to ours, and so much more easily injured. However,” with a cheerful smile, “it’s much too early in the season to talk of broken bones. They’re bad enough at any time, so no need to think of them beforehand. Now,” giving Kate the reins, and loosing King Olaf’s head, “are you *quite* comfortable? Is there nothing more I can do for you?”

“No, nothing, thanks,” she said, wondering if he meant to depart, and wishing he would stay a little longer, at least until she had reached the high road. “I cannot thank

you sufficiently for the trouble already taken on my behalf."

"Please don't mention it. I feel only too proud to have been able to render any service, and am already amply repaid, instead of riding home alone, by the pleasure of your society." He did not intend trotting on then after all! His next speech rendered that fact yet more evident.

"There are still two or three gates to be opened," he said, as he once more remounted. "Consequently if you will allow me, I propose seeing you safely through them."

He spoke with such an air of calm decision, that there was nothing to be said, and Kate gratefully bowed assent. The presence of this handsome stranger was far from being displeasing. He had a courtly way of speaking, which appealed to her sense of refinement, and put her at her ease. Some such thoughts as these ran through her mind, as for a few seconds they rode on in silence. Her companion was engaged in a critical examination of King Olaf. Presently he said, resuming the conversation—

"May I be forgiven for expressing my

extreme admiration for your horse? He is a real beauty," once again running him over with the eye of a connoisseur. "A trifle small perhaps, but a rarely well-shaped animal. He's a good one too, I know, for I saw him jump a fence this morning in grand style. There happened to be a blind ditch on the take off side, and I noticed him particularly, because to tell the honest truth, I thought you were riding just a wee bit too fast at it, but the chestnut steadied himself exactly at the right moment, and evidently requires no teaching. You're lucky in having such a good hunter."

"That I am," said Kate, charmed at hearing her favourite's praises sung, and stooping down to pat his glossy neck. "Even *my* bad riding can't make him go wrong."

"Please believe I intended to cast no aspersions on your horsemanship; on the contrary—I—I—" checking himself suddenly.

"Well, what?" she asked, with all a woman's love of flattery.

"I admired it."

Kate blushed without exactly knowing why, and endeavoured to start another topic

of discussion. Nevertheless she felt pleased to think the stranger considered her *début* in the Shires had not proved otherwise than creditable.

"I thought I was wrong," she said, "in going quite so fast, but Mrs. Forrester had specially warned me against the dangers of slow riding, and her advice carried the day. You see," turning towards him with a frank humility, "I am only a novice as yet."

Her candour was attractive, and pleased him. Coquettes and flirts he had met by the score, but straightforward, outspoken girls, with no humbug about them, were comparatively rare.

"Do you know Mrs. Forrester?" he asked.

"Yes, a little. She called upon me yesterday. We had a long chat together, and she told me a variety of news."

"Ah! she's a regular old gossip, but a good soul all the same, if only she could be persuaded to leave horse-coping alone. This animal that I am now riding once belonged to her."

"Indeed!" said Kate, speculating as to who her companion might be.

"Yes," continued he. "I bought her the end of last season, and I call her M'liss, for a wilder young savage never looked through a bridle. You remember Bret Harte's story, don't you?"

"Ah! poor M'liss. I always felt so sorry for her, and she possessed such an intense capacity of suffering. Her emotions were almost *too* keen. I hope *your* M'liss does not resemble the original one in that respect."

"No, *my* M'liss is a very sulky, thick-skinned creature, or rather *was*, for she has marvellously improved lately."

"Perhaps she too loves the schoolmaster," suggested Kate, with a little air of *finesse*.

"Not so much as she fears his reprimands in the shape of a sharp pair of spurs. Talking of horses, however, I should like you to see a four-year-old of mine, who is *almost*, if not *quite*, as handsome as the one you are on. Ah! I see"—as Kate made a cynical gesture—"you find that hard to believe?"

"Very. You must excuse my scepticism, but even if your animal were as beautiful as Venus herself, she could never compare with

King Olaf in my eyes. Perhaps it sounds conceited to say so, but you see, when you have ridden a horse a season or two, been well carried, and got to know all his good qualities, you learn to regard him with a peculiar pride and affection which prevents any other filling his place, or even approaching him in the smallest degree."

"Bravo! That is honestly spoken. I see you are fond of horses."

"*Fond!* I love them. The gift of speech after all is a dangerous one. Our friends bother us perpetually with their ill-timed chatter, our horses never. I like dumb things—things with no tongues to irritate and madden."

"Still even horses are vexatious enough at times. They are not *all* good, quiet, placid, amiable-tempered creatures."

"I know; but whatever their faults they cannot speak; silence is golden."

"Well, your ideas strike me as rather peculiar. Would you like to play at mum-chance for the rest of the way home?"

"Certainly not," said she with a laugh. "I *was* indulging in generalities, not in person-

alities. Besides, there are exceptions to every rule."

"I suppose *I* could not acquire this desirable dumbness?" he asked playfully.

"It does not appear likely," she answered, while a demure smile trembled upon her lips.

"Ah! you think I am a chatterbox?"

"I did not say any such thing."

"No, but you implied it."

"Conversation by implication is always unpleasant, and liable to lead to misconstruction. Suppose, instead, you were to tell me where we are?"

For they had quitted the green fields, and were now pacing down a good wide road.

"Don't you recognise that house?" he said, pointing to one on the left hand side.

"Why, it is Sport Lodge, surely. I had no idea we were so near home."

"Yes, Miss Brewser," he said, "it is Sport Lodge, and I am afraid I must wish you good-bye, for my way leads more to the right."

"Stay," she exclaimed, impelled by a sudden desire to learn her companion's name.

"You possess an unfair advantage over me. Before we part, at least let me know to whom I am indebted for so much kindness?"

The sun was sinking in the horizon, and its rays caught the stranger's fair hair, turning it into gold as he raised his hat from his head and said quietly—

"I am Colonel Clinker."

He was not, however, prepared for the effect produced by these apparently simple words. Kate's countenance fell, assuming an expression of unfeigned astonishment, for the announcement came upon her as an overwhelming surprise. The possibility of this pleasant, agreeable young man turning out to be the depraved individual who gambled, betted, and vowed *volens volens* to make her his wife, had never entered her mind. The disillusion was complete. Her interest had been aroused once or twice during their short ride home, the soft voice had thrilled her strangely, and now on a sudden, when she recalled these things, her animosity found vent in regret.

"Colonel Clinker!" she echoed impulsively. "Oh! I am so sorry."

The next moment she would like to have bitten out her tongue. How had she ever come to make so foolish, so idiotic a speech?

"Sorry!" he said, feeling in his turn somewhat surprised and scarcely flattered. "Why sorry? What has sorrow got to do with my identity?"

"Oh, nothing," she answered coldly, striving hard to conceal her confusion.

"You are enigmatical in the extreme, Miss Brewser. You first do me the honour of wishing to learn my name; you then, when I accede to the desire, tell me you are sorry. What inference am I to derive from such a speech?"

"I—I—really don't know."

"Miss Brewser," he said, looking Kate full in the face, "you are equivocating. You know perfectly well, and are concealing something from me."

The hint of deception touched her to the quick.

"Well then," she said, with considerable heat, "if you *must* know I will tell you. I thought before I knew who you were that you were nice, and now—"

Hesitating how best to conclude the discourteous sentence.

"You are sorry because I am *not*."

An awkward silence ensued. Colonel Clinker was evidently both hurt and perplexed, but when he spoke next all trace of anger had died out of his face.

"After all," he said, "why should I be vexed at your frankness? Very likely you are right, and I am a worthless fellow. It does one good now and again to be taken down a peg or two in one's own self-esteem. Tell me, is there nothing I can do to become nice, or at all events *nice-er*?"

She felt beaten. This humble appeal went far to disarm her wrath and raise her respect in spite of his previous shortcomings, but she was not going to let him see that he had gained the smallest advantage.

"That," she replied coolly, "is for you, not me, to try and discover."

"Miss Brewser," he said, gnawing at his moustache with annoyance, "you appear to me to know of something to my disadvantage, and I therefore feel as if I were groping *in the dark*, being ignorant of any possible

cause of offence. Can you not tell me what it is ? ”

“ No.”

“ Then you admit that there *is* a cause ? ”

“ I admit nothing. And really, Colonel Clinker, I hope you will excuse me, but I must be going. I don’t want my horse to catch cold.”

“ At least you will give me the opportunity of endeavouring to regain that good opinion which I seemingly have forfeited ? ” he urged, with a persistence surprising even to himself, but she had piqued his curiosity and wounded his pride. “ I shall do myself the honour of calling,” he added, taking a sudden resolution.

“ It’s hardly worth your while,” was the encouraging reply, though Kate as she uttered the words felt ashamed of their rudeness.

The Honble. Jack opened his blue-grey eyes wide, and fixed her with a steady gaze, under whose influence her own orbs sank to the ground. Once again did victory lie with the assailed, and the assailant encountered a serious rebuff.

“ You must allow *me* to be the best judge

of that," he said calmly, and then he touched his hat, and without looking to the right or to the left rode straight away in the direction of Foxington.

Kate unconsciously watched his retreating form. Certainly this Colonel Clinker was a cool hand. She had signified clearly she did not wish him to call, and yet he had announced his intention of doing so. Evidently he intended carrying off the money bags with the smallest possible amount of delay. Such conduct was outrageous. She quivered with indignation as she walked King Olaf up the hill that led to Sport Lodge.

"Beast!" she said to herself. "What a fool I was not to give him a piece of my mind when I had the chance! I can't think what on earth made me such a coward!"

Could it be possible, that the low tones of that truthful voice, or the pained look of those honest, wondering eyes were to blame for a fault not often attributable to Kate Brewster?

"Bother the man!" she exclaimed, working herself up to a still further pitch of indignation. "I wish to goodness I had never seen him. I—I—I—*hate* him!"

But even while she spoke the words she knew them to be false, knew that though Jack Clinker might have—aye, and probably had a hundred faults, he was both a man and a gentleman. Nevertheless, Kate when she reached home did not feel so satisfied with the results of her afternoon's ride as to communicate any portion of them to Mary Whitbread. Neither did Colonel Clinker, though he dined out that evening in the company of Captain Fuller and the Chirper, and was plied by them with questions as to his early disappearance from the hunting field, consider it necessary to inform his friends how he, that afternoon, had formed the heiress's acquaintance. Perhaps the circumstances were not so pleasant as to justify him in doing so. Anyhow he acted upon that remark of Miss Brewser's, in which she had alluded to the special value of silence. But though he spoke little he thought none the less, and his thoughts dwelt freely on the strange manner in which she had expressed her sorrow at hearing his name, and the frigidity she had afterwards displayed. That any kind friend had informed the young lady of the nature

of a certain bet, written down in Captain Fuller's betting-book, never entered his mind. In fact the bet itself had been forgotten as soon as made, sharing the fate of many another post prandial transaction, and had entirely escaped his memory. Mrs. Forrester's "good turn" was however already commencing to bring forth fruits. The seed carefully sown by her judicious hand was sprouting into life, though whether adverse storms might not beat it to the ground and stamp out all the vital germs, as yet appeared uncertain.

END OF VOL. I.

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